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TWENTY TALES

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TWENTY TALES

by

H. E. BATES



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

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CONTENTS

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN . . .	9
THE FLYING GOAT ✓	15
THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE	21
SHOT ACTRESS — FULL STORY ✓	41
PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS	53
THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS	67
CLOUDBURST ✓	77
THE CAPTAIN ✓	85
ITALIAN HAIRCUT ✓	95
THE KIMONO ✓	103
THE LANDLADY ✓	123
BREEZE ANSTEY	135
OLD ✓	163
A SCANDALOUS WOMAN	171
QUARTETTE ✓	177
THE GOAT AND THE STARS ✓	183
ALEXANDER ✓	189
LANKO'S WHITE MARE ✓	233
A TINKER'S DONKEY ✓	245
THE BARBER ✓	249

TWENTY TALES

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN...

IT was no use, no use any longer. She must begin to eat less, much less; starve herself, cut out everything. It could not go on like this: public dinner after public dinner, company luncheons, lavish food, eating till she could not breathe, eating for the sake of eating. She must be firm, put a stop to it, now, at once, before the summer got too hot, before Victor got to be the director of any more companies. Two hundred and thirteen pounds. She saw the hands of the bathroom weight-clock revolve again, in imagination, and rest at that awful figure. She felt like weeping. It was something terrible. No woman could bear it. And so she had made up her mind. She was going to starve herself, and see what that would do.

She bounced and dumped along the edge of the lake, in the park, like a distended silk balloon, her feet still quite neat, her ankles incongruously bony still, so that it appeared as if she wore false legs. Her mind whispered and panted its little humiliations in small gas-escapes of misery.

On the edge of the lake, on the already hot grey concrete, small children were crumbling bread and saffron-yellow buns for the ducks. Mrs. Victor was revolted. Food, always food, eating, didn't the world do anything else? Gulls planed over and clawed the air, to swoop down and up and snatch the thrown bread before it reached the water. Their dismal crying greed set Mrs. Victor's nerves on edge like wire scratching on glass. She bumped and panted past, out of range of gulls and children and the revolting sight of bread thrown and snatched.

She sat down on one of the green public seats. There was another thing. Now it had got so that she couldn't sit on one of the twopenny chairs. They were made only, it seemed, for normal people, the slim and elegant. She remembered the days when she had been slim and elegant: straight as a line-prop, hardly fat enough in fact, her body its own corset.

Like the young woman on the seat. Just like her. Scarcely enough flesh, if anything. Mrs. Victor looked at the young

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN...

woman who, in turn, was staring across the water: blonde, young, with shadow-pointed cheeks and small scarlet button-hole mouth closed tight up. Mrs. Victor, looking to see if she had any stockings on at all, saw the points of stitched ladders where the legs crossed. Stockings meant she had some sort of belt on. Well, that was just for decency. She didn't need support. It was a figure that had stepped straight out of advertisements.

Mrs. Victor looked down at her own squabbed-out thighs, like two vast aerated sausages, and felt like weeping. She could not bear it, and looked back at the girl.

Ask her if she diets. Somehow she looks as if she diets. That sort of thinness can't be natural. There's thinness and thinness. Somehow she looks as if she must diet.

Mrs. Victor hesitated to speak. She had seen the scorn, before now, in the faces of the young. She didn't want to speak and then have it thrown back in her face. Then she looked again at the girl. You could have blown her away with a breath. She had the ethereal lightness you saw spoken of in advertisements. There was nothing on her.

More children had appeared on the lake-edge, with more bread, so that the air was filled with a shrieking storm of gull-wings. Mrs. Victor said:

'Excuse me. I've been looking at your figure, and wondering —'

'Eh?' The girl, startled, turned her extraordinarily thin face. 'I'm sorry. I can't hear for the birds.'

For a moment the birds quietened. Mrs. Victor said:

'I hope you'll excuse my speaking to you. I've been looking at your figure. Wondering if you did anything special for it. If you dieted. You see how I am.'

'No,' the girl said. 'I don't do anything special.'

'Oh!'

Mrs. Victor, not knowing how to go on, smiled. The girl's profile looked as though it had been pared down by a knife.

'I've got so desperate now,' she said, 'that I'm thinking of seriously starving.' It did not sound right. 'Starving seriously,' she said.

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN...

If she thinks I'm going to sit here, the girl thought, and listen, she's crazy. Not me. I'm going. I'll go straight away. She sat quite still. If I get up, she thought, I think I shall fall down.

'Really starving.' Mrs. Victor went into an explanation of the word, moving slightly along the seat. 'You know. Days without food.'

'I know.'

'I'm sick of food. Sick of it.' Mrs. Victor began to explain who she was, how, being who she was, she had to attend dinners, functions, eating, always eating, eating until now, at last, she was utterly sick of eating. 'Take last night. The dinner began at eight and we were still eating at half-past nine. Still eating!'

The girl sat trying to think of something to say. She could think of nothing but her suspender belt. It felt loose on her body. It will fall off, she thought, if I move. I've altered the hooks once already. I shall have to alter them again.

'First there was some special sort of cheese, Norwegian or something, on rye-biscuit. As if we needed that. Then soup, *consommé* or *crème*, just the usual things. Then fish. Fish I should have liked, but it was messed up with spaghetti and sauce and egg and I can't think what. All fattening things. And that's how it went on. Duck, pheasant, chicken — and I was so sick of them I tried venison. Have you ever eaten venison? My husband was having it and he said I should try it. I couldn't eat it. I can't explain what it tastes like — but queer, somehow. An acquired taste. You've never tried it?'

'No,' the girl said, 'I can't say I have.'

'Don't.'

I could eat an elephant, the girl thought. I could eat bacon-rind. She sat thinking of bacon-rind. People didn't eat it. They cut it off, but if you did fry it, it jumped in the frying-pan like snakes.

'If you multiply that by hundreds you'll see what I have to go through in a year,' Mrs. Victor said.

Multiply it by hundreds. Like snakes. Snakes lay eggs, hundreds of eggs. The girl remembered going, long ago, to

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN...

the zoo, and then giving whole bananas to monkeys. It's not so bad, she thought. I had a banana yesterday. I made it last forty-three minutes. With luck I could make it last an hour.

'I've tried special baths. I've tried slimming creams and massage. I've tried everything,' Mrs. Victor said. 'It costs me a fortune.' Children were beginning to come nearer, along the edge of the lake, drawing the gulls with them as though they were kites on invisible strings. Ducks scurried round in brown skirmishing flotillas, quarrelling, diving, tails up. 'I've done everything, and this morning I went over fifteen. It's terrible. I used to be as thin as you.'

It's no good, the girl thought, I've got to go down to the post office. If Harry sends the money I shall know it's all right. If he doesn't send it I know I'm done. Whatever happens, I've got to go down to the post office and see. I've got to be logical. I haven't a job. I've got to be logical. During the war we used to eat locust beans. You never see them now. They said they had food value. We used to make them last a long time. That's what I want, something to last a long time.

'So I think there's nothing for it,' Mrs. Victor said, 'but to try simple starvation. I shall just starve and starve.' She laughed a little. 'After all it must be the oldest form of losing weight in the world.'

The children had come very near, the gulls shrieking and wheeling above the flurry of ducks, white bread and yellow bun-scrap flashing up in arcs against the bright sunshine.

'You see, it wears me out. Just sitting here now, I'm so hot I don't know what to do with myself. I'm all perspiration. I shall have to change everything when I get home.'

A small child holding a round sugar-shining bun threw it into the water in one piece.

'It's so humiliating. You see, don't you? Your friends, people staring at you. When you've been thin, when you've had a nice figure. You see, don't you?'

'I see,' the girl said.

'I envy you,' Mrs. Victor said.

Again the girl thought, if I get up I shall fall down. She

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN...

stirred slightly, feeling the emptiness of her stomach send out fainting waves of weakness. Her mind slipped into silliness. If A has two shillings between her and the workhouse and there's no letter at the post office how many bananas must A eat before A is dead?

On the edge of the lake a nurse stood on tip-toe and tried to regain the lost bun with the ferrule of a sunshade, regained it, and gave it back to the child. 'Of course it's all right. Of course they'll eat it. They'll eat anything.'

'I know my husband won't like it,' Mrs. Victor said. 'But I can't help it. He'll say think of my position and so on. But it's no use. I've got my own pride — I can't look at myself in the glass.'

Now the small child had himself begun to eat the water-soaked bun, liking it. The nurse, grey-capped, swooped down on him like a gull herself, snatching it away, startling him to tears.

'Why does she make that child cry? I can't stand children crying,' Mrs. Victor said. 'It gets on my nerves. People think because you're fat and easy going you've got no nerves. My nerves are all on edge.'

The crying of the small child against the crying of the gulls made wire-shrill discords. Nerves, the girl thought. Nerves. Somebody had said that to her. Nerve. She remembered, saw herself mooning slowly along the street, intentionless, her mind dead. You've got a nerve, a voice said. Beginners on the other side of the street. When you went to the cinema this was what happened. This, as you knew, was the thing that the heroine had to face, and yet it was never mentioned. It was the most terrible thing, and in the end, by some awful irony, it was the director who saved her both from it and from herself.

'That child,' Mrs. Victor said. 'I can't stand it. Why does she make it cry like that?'

The child, holding his breath, had gone from crimson to faint purple in the face, in the fury of his frustration. The waves of torturing sound beat against the great cushion of Mrs. Victor's body and shook her nerves. She got up.

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN...

'It's no use, I shall have to go.'

At that moment the nurse snatched up the child, put him into a large white perambulator, snatched the bun from his hands and threw it into the lake again. In a moment, as the perambulator moved off, the screams of the child began to die away.

'Well, that's better,' Mrs. Victor said. 'Even so, I think I must go.'

I must go too, the girl thought. But if I get up I shall faint.

'Goodbye,' Mrs. Victor held out her hand. 'Think of me starving.' She held in her large moist hand the girl's thin one. 'Perhaps we shall meet again.'

'Goodbye,' the girl said.

Mrs. Victor walked away along the edge of the lake. The girl sat staring at the water. Ducks and birds and light and bread revolved like a lucky wheel against the sun.

THE FLYING GOAT

WHAT? the man in the saloon said to me, you never heard of Jethro Watkins's flying goat? Well, there was a chap in this town, once, who made himself a pair of straw wings; strapped them on his shoulders, jumped off the top of a house and broke his neck. Then there was another chap who made himself a bicycle with wings; he called it a flycycle, and he flycycled over the top of a precipice and broke his neck. But Jethro Watkins had a flying goat. I don't mean a goat that flew with wings. I mean a goat that flew without wings. And when I say flew I mean flew. I don't mean it jumped over some three-foot railings and flew by mistake. It flew regularly. It flew all over England. Surely, he said, you must have heard of Jethro Watkins's flying goat?

'No,' I told him, 'I never heard of it.'

Well, that's funny, he said. You mean you never heard about the time it flew off the tower at Blackpool?

'No,' I told him, 'I can't say I did.'

No? he said. Then you must have heard about the time it flew fifteen times round the tent in Wombwell's circus?

'No,' I told him, 'I can't say I heard about that either.'

I don't know, he said, I'm sure. It's funny. Nowadays nobody seems to have heard about anything.

'Well, who was this Jethro Watkins?' I said.

Well, in the first place he was a very religious chap, he said. He was in the Salvation Army. Used to play the euphonium. And then he was very fat — weighed fifteen, perhaps sixteen stone — and by trade he was a thatcher — you know what I mean, he thatched roofs and stacks. Always up on a ladder, catching every bit of wind. Well, Jethro told me how what with being a euphonium player and a thatcher and always being concerned with wind one way or another he began to study wind. Up there, on his ladder, he used to see what wind could do — toss birds about, toss whole armsful of straw about, almost lift a roof off before he got it pegged down. You know how powerful a big wind is — blows trees down, even blows

THE FLYING GOAT

houses down. Well, Jethro had been studying all that years before he got this idea of a flying goat.

‘And how,’ I said, ‘did he get this idea of a flying goat?’

Like all big ideas, he said. By accident. Just like that. All of a pop. He saw some posters about a menagerie and one of the items was a flying ape and Jethro went to see it. Well, there wasn’t much in it. Just a big grey-looking ape that did a big trapeze jump and they called it flying. Well, Jethro thought it was a swindle. He went home in disgust and he went and stood in his backyard and looked at his goats. Did I tell you he kept goats? No? Well, he’d kept goats for years — bred and raised them. One of the things that made him such a strong, big fat man was goats’ milk. He’d drunk it twice a day for years. And suddenly he had this big idea — a flying goat. If a monkey could fly, why not a goat? And if a man could make money out of a flying ape, why couldn’t he make money out of a flying goat? The thatching trade had been going down steadily for years, and just about that time it had got down almost to a standstill. So this idea of a flying goat was a godsend. Providence. According to Jethro’s idea it was God stretching down a helping hand.

‘Now you’re going to tell me,’ I said, ‘that he taught the goat to fly until it could fly well enough to fly round a circus?’

Well, no, he said. That’s what he tried to do. But it didn’t come off. He got one of his goats and started to train it in the backyard — you know, put it first on a beer-barrel and made it jump off, then on two beer-barrels, and then on a painter’s trestle about fifteen feet high. But it was no good. He could see he’d made a mistake.

‘Now don’t tell me,’ I said, ‘that this is all a mistake?’

No, he said. The idea of training a goat to fly was a mistake that’s all. Jethro could see that. No, what he did do was to breed a goat that could fly — you see how I mean, a sort of miracle. Jethro was a very religious chap — Salvation Army meetings, playing in the band, believing in the Bible and all that. And suddenly that’s how he saw it. I want a flying goat, he thought, and if I want it badly enough and ask God then God will perform a miracle and see that I get it. If

THE FLYING GOAT

God doesn't approve I shan't get it and then I shall know it was wrong to ask for it. So he mated two of his goats and prayed for a miracle to happen and waited. He prayed twice a day, morning and night, for a kid that could fly. He knew all about miracles. If five thousand people could be fed with two loaves and five small fishes, or if somebody could raise a boy from the dead or if a sick man could pick up his bed and walk then why shouldn't an ordinary chap like himself get a simple thing like a goat that could fly? Ask yourself. It was reasonable.

'And now you're going to tell me,' I said, 'that in due course the kid was born and it could fly from birth like a bird?'

It was, he said, and it could. The second day of its life it began to jump up in the air. Like a lamb, only higher. Then the third it jumped higher still. The fourth day it flew over its mother. Flew, not jumped. Then by the end of the week it was flying over fences. It flew over a row of kidney beans in Jethro's garden. Inside a month it could fly over a haystack. It was a lovely white colour, and Jethro told me it was so light that you could hold it in your hand like a ball of cotton wool.

'Then what?' I said.

Well, Jethro had another idea. It was through the Grace of God that I got the goat, he thought. The right thing to do is to devote it to the service of God in return. So he put it up to the Salvation Army — told them how God had wrought a miracle for him, tried to make them see how this flying goat was proof of the power of prayer, asked them to come and see it for themselves. Up to that time he'd kept it secret. Now he wanted all the world to know about it. Well, they were very sniffy, the Salvation Armyists. It looked like sacrilege. The power of prayer and miracle was kept for serious things — healing, faith, help in time of trouble, sin and sorrow and so on. A flying goat looked a bit like taking a rise out of the Almighty. Well, they argued and disagreed and then argued again, but at last Jethro persuaded them. The Salvation Armyists gathered in a field behind Jethro's house and waited for the goat to fly. It didn't do anything. It didn't

THE FLYING GOAT

even lift its feet off the ground. Well, just what we thought, they said, just what we expected. The man has not only made fools of us but has taken the name of God in vain. We'll see about this, and they did, to the extent that Jethro never set foot in the Salvation Army hall again and never played the euphonium for them any more.

'But still,' I said, 'the goat could fly?'

Yes, he said, the goat could fly. It flew better and better as it grew older and older. Jethro never trained it. Just fed it and it flew. The only thing Jethro used to do was whistle it home, and then when it came home it used to circle round and round like a homing pigeon. Well, soon after the Salvation Armyists turned him down Jethro had another idea. He decided to take the goat on tour. That's how he got in with the circus. At first, Jethro told me, they didn't believe him. Then when they saw that goat flying over a circus tent the circus folk went crazy. It was just the craziest thing ever seen in a circus. Better than man-eating lions, performing seals, dancing ponies and all that. Everybody had seen things like that, but nobody had ever seen a flying goat. It was a sensation. It went everywhere. Everywhere you went you saw the circus-bills about Jethro Watkins's flying goat.

'It's funny I never heard of it,' I said.

Funny, he said, I should think it is funny. Everybody's heard of Jethro Watkins's flying goat. Everybody.

'Except me,' I said. 'Well, what happened then?'

Well, Jethro thought he could do better for himself than the circus. So he struck out on his own. And that began the real sensational stuff. You know, flying off the top of the Tower at Blackpool and all that. You mean to say you never heard of that?

'No,' I said, 'I can't say I ever heard of it.'

It was in all the newspapers, he said. Pictures of it. Millions of people there. Don't you know what happened? A newspaper offered Jethro five thousand pounds if the goat would fly off the top of the Tower. Well, it flew off the top of the Tower and flew round over the sea for a few minutes and then settled on the pier. But that was nothing. You must have

THE FLYING GOAT

heard all about the time when it flew away from Belle Vue, Manchester, and was missing over the Pennines for a night and a day and then came flying home to Jethro's old home here as cool as you like? Why, he said, that was the biggest sensation of the lot.

'I bet it was,' I said. 'Now tell me it flew the Channel.'

Well, it did, he said, but that isn't what I was going to tell you about. I was going to tell you about the time it had kids.

'Don't tell me they could fly,' I said.

One could, he said, but not the other. That was funny, wasn't it? One kid was black, and one was white, and it was the white one that could fly. Jethro said it was marvellous. Better than the mother. The second day after it was born Jethro took it out and it flew twice round the church steeple. Well, if a goat could do that on the second day of its life, what was it going to do when it was a year old?

'You tell me,' I said. 'I don't know.'

Well, he said, that was the sad thing. Jethro died. He was always a fat chap and I think he must have got fatty heart or something. Anyway the day he got the young goat to loop the loop the excitement must have been too much for him. He dropped down dead.

'The excitement,' I said, 'would have been too much for anybody. What happened to the goats after Jethro died?'

Well, he said, that's another funny thing. Nobody seems to know.

'They just flew away,' I said. 'Is that it?'

Well, nobody knows, he said. There were a lot of goats sold at auction after Jethro was dead, but none of them could fly.

'How many times did you see the flying goat?' I said. 'I mean you, yourself.'

Well, he said.

'Didn't you ever see it at all?'

Well, he said, to tell the truth I didn't. I heard all about it, but I never got the chance to see it.

'Didn't you ever know anybody who saw it?' I said.

No, he said, I can't say I did. Not exactly.

THE FLYING GOAT

'Well,' I said, 'didn't you ever know anybody who knew anybody who'd seen it?'

No, he said, if it comes to that, I didn't. Not exactly.

'Then,' I said, 'tell me who told you all about it?'

Jethro, he said.

I didn't say anything this time.

Don't you believe it? he said.

'Oh! yes,' I said, 'I believe it.'

After all, he said, it takes no more believing than the feeding of five thousand people with two loaves and five small fishes, does it?

'Oh, no!' I said.

After all, he said, you can make yourself believe in anything if you want to, can't you?

'Oh! yes!' I said.

Well, he said, it's been very nice. I think I'll be getting along.

'No, you don't,' I said. 'Wait a minute. Just sit down. It's my turn to tell you something. I'd like to tell you about my uncle Walter's musical pig. Now when I was a boy my uncle Walter had a pig that played the trombone. I don't mean it was a pig that played the trombone with the trombone. I mean it was a pig that played the trombone without a trombone. Now this pig had a litter —'

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

THE offices of the *Argus and Express* Printing Works, which printed and had printed for forty-five years *The Nulborough Weekly Argus and Express*, were in a state of excitement. The proprietor, founder and at one time editor of the paper, Mr. Charles Macauley Montague, a public figure in the town, had died suddenly in the night.

In the front office, which had been partitioned off from the printing rooms by a match-board partition, varnished yellow, the editor, Stacey, was beating the fist of first one hand, then another, then both, on the edge of the varnished roll-top desk. It was a hot day in August and the heat of weeks had burnt the walls against the fly-specked windows to soft blisters. Resin had long since oozed, for the same reason, out of the pine knots, to be boiled to reddish blisters which past summers had dried and cracked. The panels of thick ridged glass in the factory-type windows somehow let in the heat and then imprisoned it. The catches of the windows would not open and dust lay thick on the obsolete files and unpinned lays of galleys, on the desks and window-sills, and on the ancient handle-type wall telephone. Across the ceiling a steel shafting ran and revolved, let in and out of the room by two holes cut in the match-board partition like holes in a fowl-house. Mysteriously propelled, bright as a silver pencil, this piece of machinery seemed the only up-to-date thing, and certainly the only clean thing, in the office, which smelled like a long shut book suddenly opened in a chapel-pew. The place had the air of some ill-managed dead letter office long behind the times, ill-conditioned, unprosperous and hopelessly lost. Yet for forty-five years, back to the week when the first file had been pinned up in 1892, *The Argus and Express* had been run at a profit. Stacey, the editor, knew all about this, had seen the books, and knew that Mr. Charles Macauley Montague would leave about, perhaps, fifty thousand pounds. What he did not know, beyond this, was anything very much about Mr. Montague himself. He realized that he did not know

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

enough to write the obituary notice the occasion demanded.

'I tell you I've got to know something about him! Don't you see?' He beat his fists on the edge of the table as he talked to Hanson, the works manager. 'I want a special. An obituary number. I want to put his career in, his history — what he's done, what he's been! And all you can do is to stand there and say you don't know anything. Today's Thursday and the dead line's tomorrow morning.'

'You've been here as long as I have, Mr. Stacey. Six years.'

'Yes, I know. But you've lived here. In the town. All your life.'

'Yes, but —'

'All right, all right.' Stacey took up a paper from the desk. He was a young man with very black hair and a pale yellow face, with the sun-tired oily eyes of someone who had spent too long, at one time, in the tropics. He had spent two years editing a paper in Madras, from where he had gone, for another three years, to Calcutta. Yet the heat of the *Argus* office seemed to him impossibly terrific, unbearable. The back-glaze from the shining yellow varnish hurt his eyes, kindling the fatigue behind them.

'All right,' he said. 'If you don't know anything perhaps you can check these facts. Say "No" if I'm wrong.' He began to read from the paper: 'Aged 71, founded *Argus* in 1892, chairman Liberal Association 1906-14, elected Urban District Council 1919, chairman 1925, continued in council till death, vice-chairman League of Nations Union Local Branch 1925-30, Church Trustee Baptist Church 1920-32, sidesman similar period, president Local Temperance Reform Committee 1895-1914, active interest Moral Welfare 1920 onwards, active interest Young Men's Christian Association similar period, Carnegie Library Committee 1923-30, speaker and later chairman Pleasant Saturday Evenings commencing 1893, surrendered editorship of paper 1930.'

He ceased reading. The works manager did not speak. 'Well, all correct?'

The works manager said yes, he thought it was all correct.

'But that's just his activities,' Stacey said. 'I want the *man*.'

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

The personality. You know anything about that? I mean about how he was educated, how he started? He wasn't married, was he? You know why he came here? What made him choose this dead-alive hole to start a paper in?

'No, Mr. Stacey, I don't.'

'Is there anybody in the works who would know?'

The works manager thought a moment. 'Rankin might. He started here as a boy. He —'

'All right! Send Rankin up.'

While the works manager had gone Stacey took off his coat and with his fists tried hard to bang open a window, to let in some air. The windows seemed as if screwed down and would not budge. He sat down at the table in an ill temper and turned over papers, not seeing what he read.

Then the door opened and Rankin, a small man of sixty, foreman of the downstairs room, came in. He was a man who did not say much and was even then a long time saying it. His words were like a jumble of pins, which he had to sort out, and then stick in, slowly, but sharply, so that there should be no mistaking their point.

'You knew Mr. Montague a long time?' Stacey said.

'Longer,' Rankin said, and slowly he stuck in the pins of his words, his eyes slightly ironic behind his black-rimmed glasses, 'than you'd think.'

'What was his personal history? You know anything about his activities in this town besides his Liberal Association and church affairs — things like that?'

Rankin thought, then spoke. 'He was our landlord.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'You know,' Rankin said, 'where I live? In Lime Street?'

Stacey had a vision of small bay-windows, fern-decorated, in a little boulevard of limes.

'Not trees,' Rankin said. 'Just lime — ordinary lime. There was a pit there once, and then it petered out, and a man named Hobbs put up two rows of houses. Mr. Montague owned that property.'

'That's interesting, but —'

'You ought to see our house. I go to dinner,' Rankin said,

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

'at half-past twelve. Come in and have a look at us about one.'

Stacey said, without really meaning it, that he would go in. The slow careful speech of Rankin bored him a little. He wanted to open the door on the pretext of getting some air and so let the man out, but suddenly Rankin was talking again, rather faster.

'You wouldn't remember,' he said, 'the soldiers we had billeted on us during the war, would you? The first battalion Royal Welch. They came in 1915. December, just before Christmas. They marched here — marched thirty-five miles, and it rained and sleeted all the way, nine hours.'

'Yes,' Stacey said, 'but what has it got to do with Mr. Montague?'

'I'm trying to tell you,' Rankin said, in his slow pin-pricking voice. 'You ever seen soldiers after a nine-hour march in the rain? Them chaps couldn't have been wetter if they walked all day in rivers. We had three billeted on us — kids, about eighteen. And Mr. Montague and his sister had three. It upset my missus, seeing them boys. She rushed out and got mutton bones and had hot stew ready by the time they'd had a bath in the kitchen. Of course you wasn't supposed to do things like that for 'em. They'd got regulation rations, and all that. But you couldn't sit still and see kids starved through and not do a thing.'

'You seem to have forgotten,' Stacey said, with patience, 'that you're talking about Mr. Montague.'

'No, no,' Rankin said. No. Everybody in Nulborough did the same for them boys — got 'em stew and tea and cocoa and all the like o' that — everybody. All except Mr. Montague.'

Stacey did not speak. He sat quite still. He felt a small aperture in his mind open and let in a small slit of light.

'All except Mr. Montague,' Rankin said, 'and Miss Montague. No stew for them kids, no cocoa, not a drop o' tea. No bath. You couldn't wonder what happened — one of 'em got pneumonia and died, and in a week the other two asked to be moved.'

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

Stacey, watching the small aperture of light in his mind grow larger, could not speak. Then Rankin said a surprising, irrelevant thing.

'He never had more than half an egg for his breakfast. Mr. Montague half an egg, Miss Montague half an egg.'

Rankin stood silent, looking at Stacey. It was as though he had finished sticking in the pins of his words, as though he had at last made a pattern of them, like the pattern on a pin-table. He seemed to stand there and say: 'Now it's your turn. You shoot. See if you can get the ball in the right hole,' his small ironical print-black eyes speaking for him.

Stacey did not speak, and Rankin, after asking if there was anything more that he needed, turned to go. Stacey stopped him at the door.

'You know anybody else,' he said, 'who might tell me anything?'

Rankin said: 'Miss Montague might.' He paused. 'I say she might. But Brierley's the man you ought to see. Started here as compositor in 1892 and worked himself up to manager. Left just before you came. I say left.'

'Where's he live?'

'Eighteen Denmark Street. You'll pass it on the way up to Miss Montague.'

As Rankin left the office, Stacey remembered something and called after him: 'I'll drop in and see you about one.' Alone, he contemplated the small aperture of light in his mind. He tried to bring pressure on it, as he had done on the window, in order to make it open wider. In this uncertain state of mind, he got his keys out of his desk and unlocked the door which led into Mr. Montague's office and went in. He looked cursorily over Mr. Montague's desk and went to open and shut one or two of the pigeon-drawers, not at first reading anything. Then journalistic curiosity got the better of him, and he sat down on the old fashioned swivel-chair and began to read, here and there, some of Mr. Montague's papers. He found a copy of Mr. Montague's birth certificate; it showed his registration as a child in a small town in the county of Essex, his father a solicitor's clerk, his mother described as a

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

machinist. The date was 1865. In the same drawer he found envelopes containing copies of Mr. Montague's life policies. Below them were letters from Mr. Montague's London brokers, and from them it seemed that Mr. Montague had held substantial holdings in steel generally, and in arms particularly. One letter acknowledged the transference, in Mr. Montague's name, of some £8000 from investment in Public Utilities to investment in the share organizations manufacturing arms. Turning over more papers, Stacey came across a series of hotel bills. These were all for hotels in various parts of London, but appeared otherwise to have nothing to do with each other. Then Stacey noticed that they were bills, always, for double rooms taken and vacated on the same days of the week, Friday and Saturday. In another drawer he found two bills, both from the same hotel, dated as recently as July of the current year. The hotel was near Paddington Station and he put one of the bills in his pocket.

In his own office the telephone rang.

Answering it, he heard the crackling echo of Miss Montague's voice. He had already spoken to her once that morning, to convey the regrets of convention. Now he heard her asking if he would go up and see her. He said he would be there in half an hour.

Hot air pressed down on him in a series of dusty waves as he spoke into the antiquated wall mouth-piece. Hanging up the receiver, he made one more effort to open the window, banging it with his fist, so that the office would be fresh when he came back. The window would not budge.

He went downstairs, gave instructions that he would be out till 1.30, and then backed his car out of the cinder-yard running up by the works entrance. He calculated that he could give the man named Brierley twenty minutes and still arrive punctually for Miss Montague.

Denmark Street ran along the old part of the town, by the now culverted river, just before a steep rise in the land. Beyond it short streets rose steeply to the district popularized by the pre-war manufacturers, who had built large red-brick laurel-encompassed houses in what had then been cheap land.

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

Brierley's house was number eighteen in a row of thirty-six. They were old stone houses rendered over with thin pumice-coloured cement, against the dampness of the river flowing partly underneath them.

Brierley's door was opened by a young man of twenty-six or more, whose face to Stacey seemed partially familiar. He had a screw-driver and a coil of insulated wire in his hands, and inside the room Stacey could see the man he took to be Brierley, sitting at a table strewn with the parts of a dismantled wireless set.

'Mr. Brierley?' Stacey said. 'I dropped in to tell you that Mr. Montague was dead. Perhaps you heard.'

Brierley got up from the table. He was dressed in engineer's blue overalls, a big man, with a greasy face and bright grey eyes that were like polished machine bearings. 'Come in a minute,' he said, and Stacey stepped straight from the street into the room, telling Brierley, as he automatically wiped his shoes on the door-mat, who he was.

'I've got to get an obituary notice, and a pretty big one, for tomorrow,' he said. 'You were with Mr. Montague a long time and I thought perhaps you could tell me something.'

'Yes,' Brierley said, 'I could tell you something.' He looked at Stacey with eyes that were as bright but as dead as steel. Then suddenly they were alive, angrily set in motion. 'For a start,' he said, 'I'll tell you what to write at the top o' that notice. Write — "A Bloody Good Job". Write that.'

Stacey became aware again of the aperture of light in his mind. He looked at Brierley's eyes. He remembered another man he had interviewed, in Madras, after a railway accident in which the young girl he was about to marry had lain for two hours with crushed legs. He saw the same energy of pained fury generated in Brierley's eyes with the same inability to escape, to spring out of the latent flesh and direct itself. It occurred to him suddenly that the balls of Brierley's eyes could slot into the pattern made by Rankin's pins: the two were connected, component, springing from the same hatred.

'Sit down,' Brierley said. He looked at the young man.

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

'You'd better go and get that detector valve,' he said. 'We shan't get much forrader without it.'

The young man went out, and Stacey, the impression of familiarity still with him, sat looking after him, semi-consciously. Then Brierley sat down and they looked at each other across the litter of tools, screws, wireless parts. Brierley's eyes were still.

'Anything else you'd like me to put?' Stacey said.

'Yes.' Brierley said, slowly. 'Find out the bloody truth and put that in.'

'I'd like to. But —'

'Put that kid in,' Brierley said. 'Yes, him. My daughter's kid. — Montague's kid. That's *one* bit of truth you can put in.'

Stacey sat quiet, his mind clear. 'And another bit?'

'Add up,' Brierley said, 'the interest on a hundred and twenty-five quid for thirty-six years.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

Brierley said: 'Montague came here and started in a small way in 1892. In 1899 he was a bit rocky and he asked if I'd lend him some money. I'd just had a hundred and fifty left me by an old uncle up in Sheffield — so I lent him a hundred and twenty-five. Well, I was green and never asked for an agreement and he never suggested it. When I asked for repayment he said, 'I'll make you foreman and give you a ten shilling rise and pay it back that way.' Like a fool I took it. Then he got on a bit and started the paper and I asked him if he'd give my daughter a job. She was eighteen then. Well, he gave her a job in the office — meant late hours, but she liked it. Then you see what happened.'

They looked at each other, the bright machine eyes of Brierley, livid with the furious but directionless power of the revived hatred. 'But you did something about that?' Stacey said. 'Made Montague pay?'

'No,' Brierley said. 'He denied it. Then he half admitted it, but said that if we done anything I should lose my job. Well, there was only one printing works in this town then.'

There was nothing, Stacey felt, that he could say; but in his mind he began to see the small steel balls of one circum-

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

stance and another falling into the holes made by the imaginary pattern of Rankin's words. He picked up his hat and got up to go. Brierley got up also.

'You know I can't put it in,' Stacey said.

'Yes, I know! And he knew. When you get back to the office you look up the files. Read the bloody editorials. I set every one of 'em up for nearly forty years. Read the council reports, Moral Welfare, every damn thing, also who gets the biscuit every time? Montague, always Montague. He knew there were things you couldn't print.'

Stacey could not say anything. He shook hands with Brierley. The large heavy-veined hands of the older man were trembling. Then Brierley opened his mouth as though to say something else, but refrained, and Stacey knew that there was still something else, something important and perhaps painful, which had not been said.

He went out into the street, into the hot sunshine. He drove the car up the hill, coming to the Montague house in about five minutes. Set back behind a hedge of laurel and a small plantation of lime and pink may and covered almost entirely with virginia creeper, the house revealed no character. He walked up the gravel drive, pulled the brass door-bell, and was shown finally into the drawing-room, where Miss Montague was waiting for him. The blinds of the room were drawn and the whole effect — the yellowish light, the rarefied silence, the semi-stale smell of upholstery, all reminded him of the East. He had interviewed many second-rate opera singers, in many such shaded and faded rooms, in Calcutta.

Miss Montague, a straight hipped, thin woman already all in black, with a square gold locket at her neck, looked ill. She struck him as being a woman who had for years concealed the fact that she thought for herself. Her mind was like a prayer book with a safety clasp: tight-shut, secure, hiding something, hiding perhaps the texts of old resolves and ambitions and even desires. She looked hungry, not merely emotionally and mentally, but physically. She looked as if she had lived, for the past twenty years, on sandwiches of india-paper. He remembered Rankin, the half egg for break-

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

fast, the war-time story of meanness. It astonished him to see no meanness in Miss Montague's face, but only, uppermost, a look of hungry martyrdom.

He felt hungry himself, having breakfasted at his lodgings at eight. The hot sunshine had tired him, and he would have been glad of a cup of coffee.

He sat down on the sofa, carefully, between the geometrically placed cushions of dark plum velvet, and Miss Montague sat in a chair opposite. They had already exchanged the formal regrets over the telephone. Now she simply said:

'It is very good of you to come. This afternoon I expect the relations. I have been on my feet since half-past four.'

He heard in the voice the same skin-and-bone expression as he saw in her face. For want of something to say, he threw out a large hint about some refreshment.

Much to his surprise she took it. She said; 'Perhaps that's what's the matter with me. I haven't eaten since last night. I came over faint a few minutes ago. Could you eat something, Mr. Stacey?'

'I feel so hungry,' he said, 'I could eat a plate of fried eggs.'

She looked startled. Fear and temptation, with some kind of hesitant courage, filled and emptied her eyes.

'You could?' she said.

'I could!'

She seemed to think, to weigh the consequences of a decision. Then: 'I believe I could,' she said, 'myself.'

She got up and pulled the porcelain bell-handle by the fireplace, and when the girl answered, said:

'Oh, Emily. I think I could eat some breakfast now. Mr. Stacey is going to have some with me. We are going to have bacon and eggs. Have we some rashers?'

'Only two, Miss. It's Thursday.'

'Don't worry about me. I never eat more than one rasher,' Stacey said.

'I could do some fried bread, Miss,' the girl said.

'Fried bread,' Miss Montague said. 'You like fried bread, Mr. Stacey?'

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

'I love it.'

'Could you eat one egg or two?'

'Well, thank you,' Stacey said, 'I think I could eat two eggs.'

'And some tea, Emily, please,' Miss Montague said. 'On the small table in here.'

As they sat waiting for the meal to come, Stacey explained his intentions: how he would devote the two whole middle pages of the paper, suitably black edged, to Mr. Montague, outlining his career, his achievements in spheres of social activity. He explained how he had already sent out his reporters to get, from important local people, tributes to Mr. Montague's life and work and how he would print these tributes in three or perhaps four columns. He explained how he himself would write the obituary notice, the tribute that would express the loss of a paper, the employees and the community.

'But,' he said, 'I don't want to do anything you don't approve. Also there must be many things about Mr. Montague which you could tell me. Things which would help me to write the article.'

She sat looking at the wall with tired, hungry eyes, careful not to look at him. He waited for her to say something, but she sat completely silent. He recalled Rankin, Brierley, who had both spoken so readily. He saw how hard it was, one way or another, for her to say anything at all.

He began to question her, gently, in an impersonal fashion that would not hurt her. He thought he was correct in saying that Mr. Montague was seventy-one?

'Yes,' she said.

'He had come to the town in 1892? I just want to verify these facts.'

'Yes, in 1892.'

'He had not been married at all?'

'No.'

'Had Mr. Montague any other interests outside the town and the paper? Had he any interests in London?'

'No,' she said. Then she altered her mind. 'Well, if you

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

call it an interest, he used to go up to London every Friday to discuss affairs with an old friend. A Mr. Clarkson.'

'Do you yourself know Mr. Clarkson?'

'No,' Miss Montague said, 'I never met him.'

Very shortly afterwards the breakfast came. The girl said she had put the fried bread on a separate plate. Miss Montague thanked her and then lifted the covers and began to help Stacey to eggs and bread and bacon. She was looking now at the eggs, and he saw in her eyes again the same ebb and flow of guilt and temptation, pursued by courage, that he had seen before. Something made him say:

'You know, I don't think I can eat two eggs, after all, my mother always used to say my eyes were bigger than my' — he wanted to say 'belly', but couldn't — 'stomach. You eat the other.'

She hesitated and he saw her lips trembling: he knew she was crying with anxiety, inwardly, frightened. He coaxed her: 'You haven't eaten since last night,' and then, at first slowly, then quickly, in a fashion meant to be quite debonair, she took the egg.

She began to eat. At first she ate daintily, with circum-spect rabbit-movements of her thin lips, then more quickly, then quite rapidly, the golden egg-icicles hanging on her fork and lips and dropping down before she could lick them off. He saw the bacon fat shining, forgotten, on her chin, the shine very like the look in her eyes, a look of gleaming, unadulterated pleasure. And he knew that he was watching her, for the first time in her life, eat two eggs off the same plate, at the same time.

They each drank three or four cups of tea. Miss Montague at last sat back with an expression of almost bloated repletion. Two eggs, a rasher and three slices of fried bread, washed down by tea, had puffed, very slightly, the starved bagginess under her eyes. She was full up, blown-out, and the effect on her was like that of a small dissipation. She got out her handkerchief and held it to her mouth, and Stacey saw her stifle a series of small belches behind it.

The look of repletion in her flushed eyes reminded him of

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

something, but he could not think what. But suddenly he thought of something else: he realized that she had told him nothing of Mr. Montague himself. So he put another question: 'What had been Mr. Montague's relation to the arts? Music, for instance, books, painting?'

'Music he didn't care for,' she said. 'Nor painting, I think. He read a lot, at night, in bed. Most of his books are in his study upstairs.'

'You care for music?' Stacey said.

'Oh! yes, very much. Very much. I —'

She stopped. The thought, the sentence and the resolution to tell him something all collapsed. Her mind shut itself up, tight, behind its prayer-book clasp, so that nothing should fall out.

'I'm afraid I can't be much help to you,' she said.

'No?'

'He never took me very much into his confidence.'

He was about to ask another question when he remembered something. The remembrance was evoked by the puffed full-stomach look in her eyes. He had it clear, now, what it was he had been trying to remember. It was a recollection of Mr. Montague himself, at the anniversary dinner of the Local Fire Brigade. He saw Mr. Montague eating at the long white table like one of a litter of forty shirt-fronted pigs, sucking the food into his mouth nervously, as though in fear he would be pushed from the trough. The look in and under his eyes, puffed and slightly flushed, was exactly the look on Miss Montague's face: a look of hunger, in his own case intensified by greed, satisfied at last. He saw the pork gravy rushing down the bony chin, the grease like oil on the moustache ends, the eyes slightly protuberant, as though in an effort to magnify the food on the plate.

He came back to the drawing-room. He knew that he had already asked her enough. He put a last question:

'May I see Mr. Montague's books?'

'They're mostly under lock and key,' she said. 'He prized some of them greatly. But you can go up, of course.'

She led him up the once white but now bone-coloured

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

stairs. Up above, it was silent, and he could feel the presence, like a long-held breath, of the dead man. Except for this, the whole house seemed empty, a house of bone, hollow, from which flesh and marrow had been starved out. In this bare skeleton he pictured Mr. and Miss Montague living, for forty years, on half an egg a day.

She showed him into the study. 'You just look round the books,' she said, 'while I go and speak to the maid. I have so much to do.'

When she had gone he looked round the study, saw the rows of dull books, theological, political, memoirs of London journalists, on the leather-fringed bookshelves. The room held two bureaux, with wooden cupboards on top. In one of the cupboards Stacey saw a key and curiosity made him turn it and open the cupboard and look inside. Again, many books.

Stacey did not touch them. He stood looking at their titles. Not quite astonished, he read: *The Symbols of Eroticism*, *Love and Beauty*, *The Art of Love*, *Full Womanhood*, *Love and Woman*, *Seventy Art Studies (From Life)*, *Erotica Ancient and Modern*. There were others, perhaps a hundred or a hundred and twenty volumes. Stacey did not touch them. He locked the cupboard, hesitated about the key, then left it in the lock and went downstairs.

'He was a great reader,' Miss Montague said, when she met him at the foot of the stairs.

'Have you a photograph of him?' Stacey said.

'There is a very good one of him, taken at the Church Conference,' she said.

'Yes, I think we've got a block of that.'

'I daresay there were others,' she said.

'As a young man?'

'Perhaps I could look something out,' she said, 'and send it down to the office?'

He thanked her, said he would see that she saw a proof of his article by eight o'clock on the following morning — the paper would not be on the streets until afternoon — and said goodbye. She looked at him sadly, with the habitual hungry-

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

ness ingrained into her bones and flesh by years of under-nourishment, of acquiescent and perhaps, he thought, terrorized starvation. Then just as he was going, she smiled. It was the furtive semi-guilty smile of someone who has done something a trifle reckless, in a momentary spasm of abandonment. The yellow splash of egg-yolk had dried vivid on her chin.

Driving down the hill, back to the town, he only just remembered his promise to Rankin. He turned off from the hill and, in about three minutes, came to Lime Street. 'Mr. Montague owns that property,' he remembered.

He looked at the property. Two rows of dog-kennels ran parallel down a steep slope. A notice prohibiting heavy traffic stood at one end. Kids were playing, snot-nosed, on the street and on the two-feet pavement; shoe hands sat on the door-steps, in the shade, waiting for the afternoon buzzers.

Stacey found No. 12, Rankin's house, and went up the entry and round to the back door. Rankin was sitting in his shirt sleeves at the dinner table, and called, 'Come in.'

Stacey went in. 'The missus has just gone into next door,' Rankin said. 'That just leaves room for you.'

Stacey looked round the room.

'You ever keep dogs in a kennel?' Rankin said, in his dry, pin-pricking way.

Stacey knew there was no need to answer, no need to comment on the miserable smallness of the room, with the old-fashioned upright gas-mantle on the wall, the broken ceiling, the varnished and re-varnished wall-paper rubbed off, here and there, by years of passing elbows.

'If you smell anything,' Rankin said, 'it's just a stink.'

'What's the rent?' Stacey said.

'Eleven and six. Began at four and six. Montague itched it up and up till it was thirteen and six, one time. But they stopped that.'

'How many more rooms?'

'Oh! tremendous number,' Rankin said. 'Come on, I'll show you.'

Rankin showed him the little extra front room. Even on

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

that hot day, Stacey was shocked by its coldness. Rankin pulled back the linoleum, showing it blue-green, mould-furred, on the underside. He pulled up a floor board. On the joist, underneath, he showed Stacey the marks of rats' teeth, and, on the bare earth lower down, the marks of rats' feet and many rat-droppings. 'I'd take you upstairs,' Rankin said, 'but the missus would die. Come outside.'

Stacey followed Rankin into the yard. Rankin showed him the little community water-closet, the old-fashioned iron yard water tap. 'Mr. Montague owned the property,' he said.

Then: 'Did Brierley tell you anything?'

'Yes.'

'Everything?'

'No.'

'He wouldn't tell you about the girl dying?'

'That was it.'

Stacey felt that there was nothing more to say. Rankin's slow words had made another pattern of pins in his mind, and he could see the pins, now, very bright in the wider aperture of light.

He drove Rankin back to the office. They came up out of Lime Street like men coming up from a culvert for air. The heat of the day, in the higher streets, was sweet.

'Ever hear Mr. Montague talk of anyone named Clarkson?' Stacey said.

'No,' Rankin said, 'I can't say I did.'

Obsessed by the name, for some reason, Stacey went upstairs to his office. The imprisoned heat struck at him in a muffled cloud as he went in. He stood on a chair and again, as in the morning, tried to beat open the window with his fists, but without success.

Then he went into Mr. Montague's office, sat down at his desk, and tried to find some evidence of the name Clarkson. As he searched, he kept coming across the Paddington hotel bills, always for the same night, Friday, always for the double room.

He went back into his own office. The reporters had been in with notes, urgent queries, which they had left on his

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

desk. He scanned them, scribbled replies on them and then telephoned down to the composing room that he would be out again until 7 or 8 o'clock that evening, and that he would work all night.

Then he looked up the trains to London. There was one at 1.53 which would bring him into Euston at 3.11. He caught this train.

The woman who came to the door of the Paddington hotel, that afternoon, asked him at once:

'Room? Double or single?'

Like Miss Montague, the woman was also in black, and her mind, like hers, seemed clasped tight shut, so that nothing should escape from it. But the closing up of her mind was conscious.

'I would like to know if you ever knew a Mr. Montague?' he said.

'Mr. Montague, Mr. Montague,' she said. 'No, no.' She thought again. 'No.'

'Is this one of your hotel bills?' he said.

She looked at the bill. 'Oh, yes, oh yes. That's one of our bills.'

While she was looking at the bill, he took out the photograph of Mr. Montague taken at the Annual Church Conference, and gave it her. 'Would you know that gentleman?'

'That?' she said. 'I should say so! That's one of our regular clients. Mr. Clarkson.'

'That's right,' Stacey said. 'This Mr. Clarkson was a friend of Mr. Montague. That's what I was trying to get at.'

'Nothing wrong, I hope?' she said.

He told her then that Mr. Montague, Mr. Clarkson, was dead.

'Oh, poor Mrs. Clarkson!'

Stacey did not say anything.

'Sudden?'

He told her how sudden it was. 'They often came here?' he said.

'Oh! yes. But don't stand out here in the hot sun,' she said, and he followed her into the hotel, with its hat-stand in the

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

hall, the stale odours of greasy meals, the hush of afternoon. She looked into the lounge. It was empty, and she invited him in.

'Oh! poor Mrs. Clarkson.'

Casually, Stacey asked about Mrs. Clarkson. What was she like?

'Smart,' the woman said. 'Long hands. Much younger than Mr. Clarkson. Very smart.'

'Had they been married long?'

'I think about seven or eight years. Of course Mr. Clarkson used to come here before that. Oh yes. He came here quite often with the first Mrs. Clarkson.'

Stacey asked what the first Mrs. Clarkson was like.

'Oh! a much different woman. Plumper. A bit coarse. Common. A type. You could see what she wanted.'

'She died?' Stacey said.

'Oh! no, no. I don't think so. A divorce, I think. Oh! yes it was a divorce. I know we thought it was a very good thing for Mr. Clarkson at the time.'

'Thank you.' He picked up his hat.

'Won't you have a cup of tea?' she said. 'I didn't ask you.'

He thanked her, said no, and went out into the street. As she let him out of the shabby hotel lobby he knew her eyes were filling with tears and he tried not to notice it. 'We shall miss him,' she said. 'He had such a way with him.'

There was nothing else he could do. He caught the earliest train back from Euston at 6.3, having a wash and some tea on the train so that he could drive straight to the office.

It was just after half-past seven when he arrived at the office and now, as in the morning and afternoon, the pent up heat of the day struck at him as soon as he opened the door.

He sat down at his desk, tired, and looked at the day's accumulation of papers: the notes brought in by reporters, others sent up by the composing room, and among them the photograph of Mr. Montague, as a young man, sent along by Miss Montague.

He sat looking at the photograph. 'This would have been taken,' Miss Montague's note said, 'about 1893.' Mr. Mon-

THE LATE PUBLIC FIGURE

tague was wearing a straw hat, a white crocheted tie and cream flannel trousers held up by a wide fancy waist-band. The face was full lipped, the eyes very black, like ripe berries, and the nostrils wide and sensuous. Stacey looked at it.

Suddenly he could not bear the heat any longer. He got up and banged at the window with his fists again. It would not open. Then his persistent knocking split off a wafer of sun-burned paint, and he saw underneath it the head of a screw. He saw then that the window had been screwed up for years.

He went down to the engine-room and borrowed a screw-driver from the engineer and then, scraping off more paint, at last had the screws clear, so that he could turn them. There were four screws and in five minutes he had taken them out. The window opened easily then, and he left it open and the clear evening air began to come in, slowly, very sweet, out of the August dusk, clarifying the room and giving it new life.

He sat down at his desk. The tributes to Mr. Montague as a public figure, from many prominent public figures, had come in and were laid under a paper weight. He took them up and read them through.

Then, refilling his pen and taking up a pile of the obsolete pink election-ballot sheets always used in that office, by Mr. Montague's orders, for the sake of economy, he began to write his notice.

He took his tone from the tributes to a public figure. Filling his lungs with the fresh August night air, he wrote:

'It is with the profoundest regret that we learn, today, of the sudden and untimely death of Mr. Charles Macauley Montague, founder, proprietor, and editor for forty-five years of this paper, and for almost all of that time a public figure.'

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

THERE were fifteen thousand people in Claypole, but only one actress. She kept a milliner's shop.

My name is Sprake. I kept the watchmaker-and-jeweller's shop next door to Miss Porteus for fifteen years. During all that time she never spoke to me. I am not sure that she ever spoke to anyone; I never saw her. My wife and I were a decent, respectable, devoted couple, Wesleyans, not above speaking to anyone, and I have been on the local stage myself, singing in oratorio, but we were never good enough for Miss Porteus. But that was her affair. If she hadn't been so stand-offish she might, perhaps, have been alive today. As it is she is dead and she died, as everybody knows, on the front page of the newspapers.

No one in Claypole knew much about Miss Porteus. We knew she had been an actress, but where she had been an actress, and in what plays and in what theatres, and when, nobody knew. She looked like an actress: she was tall and very haughty and her hair, once blonde, was something of the colour of tobacco-stained moustaches, a queer yellowish ginger, as though the dye had gone wrong. Her lips were red and bitter; and with her haughty face she looked like a cold nasty woman in a play. She dressed, just for show, exactly the opposite of every other woman in Claypole: in winter she came out in chiffon and in summer you would see her walking across the golf-course, not speaking to anyone, in great fox furs something the colour of her own hair.

Her shop was just the same: at a time when every milliner-draper in Claypole used to cram as much into the shop-window as possible, Miss Porteus introduced that style of one hat on a stand and a vase of expensive flowers on a length of velvet. But somehow that never quite came off. The solitary hat looked rather like Miss Porteus herself: lonely and haughty and out of place.

The backways of her shop and ours faced on to each other; the gardens were divided by a partition of boards and fencing,

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

but we could see from our bathroom into Miss Porteus's bathroom. You could see a great array of fancy cosmetic bottles outlined behind the frosted glass. You could see Miss Porteus at her toilet. But you never saw anyone else there.

Then one day we did see someone else there. One Wednesday morning my wife came scuffling into the shop and behind the counter, where I was mending a tuppenny-ha'penny Swiss lever that I'd had lying about for months, and said that she'd seen a man in Miss Porteus's back-yard.

'Well, what about it?' I said. 'I don't care if there's fifty men. Perhaps that's what she wants, a man or two,' I said. Just like that.

I was busy and I thought no more about it. But as it turned out afterwards, my wife did. I daresay she was a bit inquisitive, but while she was arranging the bedroom curtains she saw the man several times. She got a clear view of him: he was middle-aged and he had side-linings and he wore a yellow tie.

That night, when I went to bed, the light was burning in Miss Porteus's bathroom, but I couldn't see Miss Porteus. Then when I went into the bathroom next morning the light was still burning. I said, 'Hullo, Miss Porteus left the light on all night,' but I thought no more about it. Then when I went up at midday, the light was still on. It was still on that afternoon and it was on all that night.

My wife was scared. But I said, 'Oh! it's Thursday and she's taken a day off and gone up to London.' But the light went on burning all the next day and it was still burning late that night.

By that time I was puzzled myself. I went and tried Miss Porteus's shop door. It was locked. But there was really nothing strange about that. It was eleven o'clock at night and it ought to have been locked.

We went to bed, but my wife couldn't sleep. She kept saying I ought to do something. 'What can I do?' I said. At last she jumped up in bed. 'You've got to get a ladder out and climb up and see if everything's all right in Miss Porteus's bathroom,' she said.

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

‘Oh! all right,’ I said.

So I heaved our ladder over the boards and then ran it up to Miss Porteus’s bathroom window. I climbed up. That was the picture they took of me later on: up the ladder, pointing to the bathroom window, which was marked with a cross. All the papers had it in.

What I saw through the bathroom window, even through the frosted glass, was bad enough, but it was only when I had telephoned to the police station and we had forced an entrance that I saw how really terrible it was.

Miss Porteus was lying on the bathroom floor with a bullet wound in her chest. We banged the door against her head as we went in. She had been dead for some time and I could almost calculate how long, because of the light. She was in a cerise pink nightgown and the blood had made a little rosette on her chest.

‘Bolt the garden gate and say nothing to nobody,’ the sergeant said.

I said nothing. The next morning all Claypole knew that Miss Porteus had been murdered, and by afternoon the whole of England knew. The reporter from the *Argus*, the local paper, came rushing round to see me before seven o’clock. ‘Give me it,’ he said. ‘Give me it before they get here. I’m on lineage for the *Express* and I’ll rush it through. Just the bare facts. What you saw. I’ll write it.’ So I made a statement. It was just a plain statement, and every word of it was true.

Then just before dinner I saw three men with cameras on the opposite side of the street. They took pictures of Miss Porteus’s shop, and then they came across the road into my shop. They as good as forced their way through the shop, into the back-yard, and there they photographed Miss Porteus’s bathroom window. Then one of the cameramen put a pound note into my hand and said, ‘On top of the ladder?’ The ladder was still there and I climbed up and they photographed me on top of it, pointing at the window.

By afternoon the crowd was packed thick right across the street. They were pressed tight against my window. I put

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

the shutters up. Just as I was finishing them, four men came up and said they were newspaper-men and could I give them the facts about Miss Porteus?

Before I could speak they pushed into the shop. They shut the door. Then I saw that there were not four of them but twelve. I got behind the counter and they took out notebooks and rested them on my glass show-cases and scribbled. I tried to tell them what I had told the local man, the truth, and nothing more or less than the truth, but they didn't want that. They hammered me with questions.

What was Miss Porteus like? Was her real name Porteus? What else beside Porteus? What colour was her hair? How long had she been there? Did it strike me as funny that an actress should run a milliner's shop? When had I last seen the lady? About the bathroom — about her hair —

I was flustered and I said something about her hair being a little reddish, and one of the newspaper men said:

'Now we're getting somewhere. Carrots,' and they all laughed.

Then another said: 'Everybody says this woman was an actress. But where did she act? London? What theatre? When?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'You've lived next door all this time and don't know? Did you never hear anybody say if she'd been in any particular play?'

'No. I — Well, she was a bit strange.'

'Strange?' They seized on that. 'How? What? Mysterious?'

'Well,' I said, 'she was the sort of woman who'd come out in big heavy fox furs on a hot summer day. She was different.'

'Crazy?'

'Oh! No.'

'Eccentric?'

'No. I wouldn't say that.'

'About her acting,' they said. 'You must have heard something.'

'No.' Then I remembered something. At a rehearsal of the Choral Society, once, her name had come up and somebody had said something about her having been in *Othello*.

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

I remembered it because there was some argument about whether Othello was a pure black or just a half-caste.

‘Othello?’ The newspaper-men wrote fast. ‘What was she? Desdemona?’

‘Well,’ I said. ‘I don’t think you ought to put that in. I don’t know if it’s strictly true or not. I can’t vouch for it. I don’t think —’

‘And this man that was seen,’ they said. ‘When was it? When did you see him? What was he like?’

I said I didn’t know, that I hadn’t seen him, but that my wife had. So they had my wife in. They questioned her. They were nice to her. But they put down, as in my case, things she did not say. Yellow tie? Dark? How dark? Foreign-looking? Actor? Every now and then one of them dashed out to the post office. They questioned us all that afternoon.

The next morning the placards of the morning newspapers were all over Claypole. ‘Shot Actress—Full Story.’ It was my story, but somehow, as it appeared in the papers, it was not true. I read all the papers. They had my picture, the picture of Miss Porteus’s shop, looking somehow strange and forlorn with its drawn blind, and a picture of Miss Porteus herself, as she must have looked about 1920. All over these papers were black stabbing headlines: ‘Search for Shot Actress Assailant Goes on.’ ‘Police anxious to Interview Foreigner with Yellow Tie.’ ‘Real Life Desdemona: Jealousy Victim?’ ‘Eccentric Actress Recluse Dead in Bathroom.’ ‘Mystery Life of Actress who wore Furs in Heat Wave.’ ‘Beautiful Red-haired Actress who Spoke to Nobody.’ ‘Disappearance of Dark-looking Foreigner.’

It was Saturday. That afternoon Claypole was besieged by hundreds of people who had never been there before. They moved past Miss Porteus’s shop and mine in a great stream, in cars and on foot and pushing bicycles, staring up at the dead actress’s windows. They climbed in over the fence of my back garden and trampled on the flower-beds, until the police stopped them. Towards evening the crowd was so thick outside, in the front, that I put the shutters up again, and by six

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

o'clock I closed the shop. The police kept moving the crowd on, but it was no use. It swarmed out of the High Street into the side street and then round by the back streets until it came into High Street again. Hundreds of people who had seen Miss Porteus's shop every day of their lives suddenly wanted to stare at it. They came to stare at the sun-faded blinds, just like any other shop blinds, as though they were jewelled; they fought to get a glimpse of the frosted pane of Miss Porteus's bathroom. All the tea shops in Claypole that day were crowded out.

We had reporters and photographers and detectives tramping about the house and the garden all that day and the next. That Sunday morning I missed going to chapel, where I used to sing tenor in the choir, for the first time for almost ten years. My wife could not sleep and she was nervously exhausted and kept crying. The Sunday newspapers were full of it again: the pictures of poor Miss Porteus, the shop, the bathroom window, my shop, the headlines. That afternoon the crowds began again, thicker than ever, and all the tea shops which normally did not open on Sunday opened and were packed out. A man started to sell souvenir photographs of Claypole High Street in the streets at threepence each, and it was as though he were selling pound notes or bits of Miss Porteus's hair. The sweet-shops opened and you saw people buying Claypole rock and Claypole treacle toffee, which is a speciality of the town. The police drafted in extra men and right up to ten o'clock strange people kept going by, whole families, with children, in their Sunday clothes, staring up at Miss Porteus's windows, with mouths open.

That afternoon I went for a walk, just for a few minutes, to get some air. Everybody I knew stopped me and wanted to talk, and one man I knew only slightly stopped me and said, 'What she look like, in the nightgown? See anything?' Another said: 'Ah, you don't tell me she lived there all alone for nothing. I know one man who knew his way upstairs. And where there's one you may depend there's others. She knew her way about.'

The inquest was held on the Monday. It lasted three days.

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

My wife and I were witnesses and it came out, then, that Miss Porteus's name was not Porteus at all, but Helen Williams. Porteus had been her stage name. It came out also that there was a conflict of opinion in the medical evidence, that it was not clear if Miss Porteus had been murdered or if she had taken her life. It was a very curious, baffling case, made more complicated because the man with the yellow tie had not been found, and the jury returned an open verdict.

All this made it much worse. The fact of Miss Porteus having had two names gave her an air of mystery, of duplicity, and the doubts about her death increased it. There sprang up, gradually, a different story about Miss Porteus. It began to go all over Claypole that she was a woman of a certain reputation, that the milliner's shop was a blind. 'Did you ever see anybody in there, or going in? No, nor did anybody else. Did anybody ever buy a hat there? No. But the back door was always undone.' That rumour gave cause for others. 'Sprake,' people began to say, 'told me himself that she lay on the floor naked. They put the nightgown on afterwards.' Then she became not only a woman of light virtue and naked, but also pregnant. 'That's why,' people began to say, 'she either shot herself or was shot. Take it which way you like. But I had it straight from Sprake.'

As the story of Miss Porteus grew, the story of my own part in it grew. Business had been very bad and for three days, because of the inquest, I had had to close the shop, but suddenly people began to come in. They looked out old watches and clocks that needed repairing, brooches that had been out of fashion for years and needed remodelling, and they brought them in; they came in to buy watches, knick-knacks, ash-trays, bits of jewellery, clocks, anything. A man asked for an ash-tray with Claypole church on it as a souvenir.

✓ By the week-end I was selling all the souvenirs I could lay hands on. The shop was never empty. I took my meals standing up and by the end of the day my wife and I were worn out by that extraordinary mad rush of business. We rested in bed all day on Sunday, exhausted. Then on Monday it all began again, not quite so bad, but almost. We were besieged

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

by people coming in, ostensibly to buy something, but in reality on the chance of hearing me say something about Miss Porteus's death. I was in a dilemma: I wanted to close the shop and end it all, but somehow it wasn't possible. Business is business and death is death and you've got to live. And so I kept open.

Then the police came to see me again. The man with the yellow tie had not been found and they wanted my wife and me to go to the station to check the statements we had given. We shut the shop and drove to the station in a taxi. We were there three hours. When we got back there was a crowd of fifty people round the shop, murmuring and pushing and arguing among themselves. The rumour had gone round that the police had arrested me.

Once that rumour had begun, nothing could stop its consequences. It was a rumour that never quite became tangible. It drifted about like smoke. It was there, but you could never grasp it. No one would really say anything, but the rumour was all over Claypole that I knew more than I would say. With one rumour went others: it began to be said that my wife and I were busy bodies, Nosy-Parkers. How else had we come to be squinting into Miss Porteus's bathroom? How else had we seen the man with the yellow tie in the back-yard? We were Peeping-Toms. I never heard anyone say this. But it was there. I saw it in people's faces: I felt it. I felt it as plainly as a man feels the change of weather in an old wound.

But there was one thing I did hear them say. I used to belong, in Claypole, to a Temperance Club, the Melrose; we had four full-sized billiard tables and in the evenings I went there to play billiards and cards, to have a smoke and a talk and so on. Next to the billiard-room was a small cloak-room, and one evening, as I was hanging up my coat, I heard someone at the billiard table say:

'Old Sprake knows a thing or two. Think I should be here if I had as many quid as times old Sprake's been upstairs next door? Actress, my eye. Some act. Pound a time. Ever struck you it was funny old Sprake knew the colour of that nightgown so well?'

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

I put on my coat again and went out of the club. I was trembling and horrified and sick. What I had heard seemed to be the crystallization of all the rumours that perhaps were and perhaps were not going round Claypole. It may have been simply the crystallization of my own fears. I don't know. I only know that I felt that I was suspected of things I had not done and had not said; that not only was Miss Porteus a loose woman but that I had had illicit relations with her; that not only was she pregnant but that I, perhaps, had had something to do with that pregnancy; that not only had she been murdered, but that I knew more than I would say about that murder. I was harassed by fears and counter fears. I did not know what to do.

And all the time that mad rush of customers went on. All day people would be coming in to buy things they did not want, just on the off-chance of hearing me say something about Miss Porteus's death, or of asking me some questions about her life. It was so tiring and irritating that I had to defend myself from it. So I hit upon the idea of saying the same thing to everybody.

'I just don't know,' I would say. I said it to everyone. Just that: 'I just don't know.'

I suppose I must have said those words hundreds of times a day. I suppose I often said them whether they were necessary or not. And when a man goes on repeating one sentence hundreds of times a day, for two or three weeks, it is only natural, perhaps, that people should begin to wonder about his sanity.

So it crept round Claypole that I was a little queer. One day I had to go to London on business and a man in the same compartment as myself said to another: 'Take any murder you like. It's always the work of somebody half-sharp, a maniac. Take that Claypole murder. Clear as daylight. The work of somebody loopy.'

That was not directed against me, but it stirred up my fears into a great ugly, lumpy mass of doubt and terror. I could not sleep. And when I looked into the glass, after a restless night, I saw a face made queer and wretched by the strain of

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

unresolved anxieties. I felt that I could have broken down, in the middle of that rush of customers and questions and fears and rumours, and wept like a child.

Then something happened. It was important and it suddenly filled the front pages of the newspapers again with the mystery of Miss Porteus's death. The police found the man with the yellow tie. It was a sensation.

The man was a theatrical producer named Prideaux and the police found him at Brighton. The fact that his name was French and that he was found at Brighton at once established him, in the public mind, as the murderer of Miss Porteus.

But he had an explanation. He had not come forward because, quite naturally, he was afraid. Miss Porteus was an old friend and her death, he said, had upset him terribly. It was true that he had seen Miss Porteus just before her death, because Miss Porteus had invited him to come and see her. She needed money; the millinery business was not paying its way. She feared bankruptcy and, according to Prideaux, had threatened to take her life. Prideaux promised to lend her some money and he was back in London early that evening. He proved it. The porter of his hotel could prove it. It was also proved that people had seen Miss Porteus, alive, walking out on the golf-course, as late as five o'clock that day. The hotel-porter could prove that Prideaux was in London by that time.

That was the end. It was established, beyond doubt, that Miss Porteus had taken her life. And suddenly all the mystery and sensation and horror and fascination of Miss Porteus's death became nothing. The papers were not interested in her any longer and her name has never appeared in the papers again.

I no longer live at Claypole. All those odd, unrealized rumours that went round were enough to drive me mad; but they were also enough to kill my wife. Like me, she could not sleep, and the shock of it all cracked her life right across, like a piece of bone. Rumour and shock and worry killed her, and she died just after the facts of Miss Porteus's death were established. A month later I gave up the business and left

SHOT ACTRESS—FULL STORY

the town. I could not go on. The first week before her death I had three people in the shop. All that mad inquisitiveness had hardened into indifference. Nobody wanted anything any longer. Nobody even stopped to stare up at Miss Porteus's windows.

Poor Miss Porteus. She took her life because she was hard up, in a fit of despair. There is no more to it than that. But nobody in Claypole ever believed that and I suppose very few people ever will. In Claypole they like to think that she was murdered; they know, because the papers said so, that she was a strange and eccentric woman; they know that she acted in a play with a black man; they know, though nobody ever really said so, that she was a loose woman and that she was pregnant and that somebody shot her for that reason; they know that she let men in and up the back stairs at a pound a time and they like to think that I was one of those men; they know that I found her naked in the bathroom and that I was a bit queer and that I knew more than I would ever say.

They know, in short, all that happened to Miss Porteus. They can never know how much has happened to me.

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

SHE was about eighteen when Alfred Purchase first brought his midget circus, Purchase's Living Wonders, to Maudit. And though she was so small, not four feet, she looked much older. She was already fully grown, and she looked mature. She had dark hair, with sloe-coloured gentle eyes and tiny pink mouth, and she was really very pretty. She was not misshapen at all, but there was something odd about her. Even when smiling she looked odd. But more than anything she was like a doll. People had in fact known her for years as Baby Doll and it was the name by which Purchase himself afterwards billed her. Her real name was Ida Moore.

Purchase gave two performances during that visit, afternoon and evening. She went to them both. Purchase had then been touring for about ten years, but he had never been to Maudit and she had never heard of him. She had lived an absolutely unexciting life and her only real difficulty had been to get a job, or rather to keep one. She could get a job easily enough, through pity, but she could never keep it long because, for some reason, people hated being served or answered or even spoken to by a midget. She had worked in shops and offices and once as a lift-girl, but it was no use. Then she got a job in the pay-box of a cinema. It was a success. As she sat there, with only her face visible at the pigeon hole, nobody could guess that she was a midget, and she often got offers to be taken out after the show. Her box was in the cheap seat section, and being a refined girl, she was particular, almost haughty, about what she did. Even so, men would press her, and finally she would go, meeting them outside in the dark alley leading up to the pay-box after the show. It was only when they discovered who she was and what she was that they gave her the go-by. 'But what's the difference?' she would say, passionately. 'I'm a woman — a girl, same as the rest. What's the difference?' But it was no use. None of them fancied her.

Then Purchase came. Although he billed his show as

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

'Purchase's Living Wonders: Greatest Midget Circus on Earth!' it was never a circus, as such. It was more of a stage show, a variety performance, with dancing and trapeze acts and singing and a few pony acts, all done by midget men and women and midget ponies. There was no tent. Purchase hired a hall in the town. He had about twenty midgets and a dozen ponies, all cream and brown piebald. The ponies were very pretty. They seemed in fact, too pretty, almost cruelly pretty, since they were naturally small and in their way almost perfect. Whereas the midgets were all imperfect, almost all really ugly, little bearded men and strange wrinkled little ladies and bandy-legged girls, all with old big-eyed faces and an expression of forlorn mockery. And somehow the show was not very good. People came to see it simply out of curiosity or pity or wonder or even contempt.

Ida was the only person, in Maudit at any rate, who went to see it out of pure excitement. All her life she had been an oddity. Now she was going to see twenty people who were greater oddities than herself and who were paid for being oddities into the bargain. It was the first day in her life when she felt that it was almost an honour to be what she was.

But oddly enough, at that first performance, it was not the midgets who attracted her at all. It was Purchase. From the very first she was almost crazy about him. It may have been because Purchase was so big or because he looked more like an evangelist than a show-proprietor or because he was rather like a father to the midgets. Certainly she had never heard anyone speak of midgets as Purchase did when he came to the front of the stage before the performance and explained the show. To her he looked extraordinarily big and, with his American sombrero hat and his rather long, curly grey hair, very like a benevolent church elder about to offer up a prayer.

But if there were any prayers it was she who felt like offering them. All Purchase did was to explain the show, but to her his words seemed like a god-send. She felt that he was the first person in her life who loved midgets, simply for what they were.

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

'My little friends,' he called them. 'My little friends are here to entertain you,' he said. 'They don't ask for pity. Don't think that. They would be very angry if they felt that you were pitying them. Although they are all so small they are all normally healthy and strong and they are happy to do what they are doing. Some of them have been with me for ten years. They are all my friends.'

Throughout the performance Purchase came at intervals to the curtain and made speeches. She was entranced. It was he who made the show a success. And to her, sitting spellbound, it was a terrific success. It was a triumph for the midgets. It was almost a triumph for herself. And long before the first performance had ended she had made up her mind what she was going to do.

That evening she walked out of the cinema pay-box without caring at all if she was sacked or not, and went to the second performance. She sat spellbound all through it. Then, at the end, she went straight round to back-stage and saw Purchase and asked for a job.

'But how old are you?' he said.

'Eighteen,' she said. 'Nearly nineteen.'

'What can you do? Singing? Dance? Have you done any stage work at all?'

'I can play the piano,' she said.

He asked her a few other questions and then said he would consider it. She knew at once what that meant: that he was going away on the following day and that it was simply his way of getting out of it.

'I want to know now,' she said. 'I want to know now. Tell me now.'

'I can't. I'm very busy.'

'Tell me now,' she said. 'Tell me how much you'll give for me.'

'Give for you?' he said. He was astonished. 'Give for you?'

'Purchase me for,' she said. 'Isn't that what it says outside? Purchase's Living Wonders? You buy midgets, don't you?'

The tears stood in his eyes as he laughed at her. Then when he had explained she laughed too. From that minute they were

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

friendly. And it was only then, as they stood there laughing, that he noticed something about her which he had not noticed about any other midget. He saw how good-looking she was, that she was really pretty. Every other midget he had ever seen or employed was ugly or quaint or in some way misshapen or out of proportion. All except her. Laughing, with her teeth showing gaily and her little bust arched strongly, she even went for a moment beyond prettiness, into beauty. She was sweet and almost perfect to look at. The only thing she had in common with other midgets was that she was tragic too.

'Do your parents know about this?' he said.

'No,' she said. 'I shall tell them tonight.'

'You know if they say no that I can't do a thing? You know that?'

'You come along too,' she said. 'They won't say no if you come.'

And late that night, a little against his will, he went home with her. 'What's the use?' he kept saying. 'Your folks will be in bed.' But nothing could put her off. 'They can get up,' she said, 'can't they?'

Her mother was in bed. Her father sat almost asleep in the kitchen in his shirt-sleeves, the day's paper on his knees, waiting up for her as he always did. He was a boiler-engineer, an ordinary normal fellow with decent grizzly hair and steel-rimmed spectacles. He had a steady job and for years all his savings had gone into doctor's bills and hospital bills in a desperate effort to put the girl right. She had been a great worry to them, a shock, almost a burden.

And when he saw her with Purchase he was frightened. He thought for a minute, until the girl began to explain, that she had been doing wrong and that Purchase, perhaps, was a detective. He listened for a minute to what she had to say and then went to the foot of the stairs and called his wife. She came down in an old faded grey dressing-gown and a shawl, scared and ruffled, and as she stood in the doorway, clutching the shawl to her neck, the girl told her what she had already told her father, that she was going away with Purchase.

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

They were both so upset that for a minute or two they were not coherent. Then the mother began to cry a little, and Purchase felt that it was time he spoke. So he made an explanation, an offer.

'She can come for six months,' he said, 'and then, if she doesn't like it, she can come back. You can have a proper agreement and you can be signatories to it. I'll pay her three pounds a week, and fifty per cent of it can be sent straight to you. I'll take care of her. If she isn't happy she can come home.'

That seemed fair, almost too fair, almost too good to be true. It gave them, for the first time, some chance of reimbursing themselves for years of expense and loss. They looked at each other for a moment and the man said: 'Mother, what do you think?' and finally the woman said: 'I've never stood in her way and don't want to now,' and like that it was settled she should go.

For a month afterwards Purchase almost regretted it. Except for playing the piano there was nothing she could do. The rest of his midgets had been at the job all their lives, and though they were third rate they were professional. Whereas there was no mistaking that she was an amateur. And for a month he did not bill her at all. She simply played the piano and all the time he was thinking that he would be glad when the six months were up.

Then he had an idea. 'What did you say the people in Maudit used to call you?' he said.

'Baby Doll,' she said. 'You know the song?'

'I know,' he said. 'And that's what you're going to be! A doll! We'll put you on as a new act.'

Perhaps it was the summer, perhaps it was really that the show was third rate, but for weeks, until this new idea of Purchase's, the show had been paying badly. Purchase was worried. Then he had the idea for the girl — to put her on as the baby doll, in a big box in which she would stand stiff and starched, first in the dress of one century, then when the box had shut and opened again in the dress of another, and so on and so on, from the sixteenth century down to the present

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

day. It was really a quick-change act and Purchase was doubtful if, inexperienced as she was, the girl could do it.

They spent hours rehearsing. It was hard to stand so stiff and immovable one minute and then, in the next and in the dark confinement of the doll's box, to do the quick change and hand the discarded dresses out of the trap-door at the back without a sound or a mistake. But gradually she perfected it. Then when it was almost stageable, she had an idea too.

'I don't think it's sensational enough,' she said.

'How do you mean?' Purchase said. 'Sensational?'

'Well, after the short skirts I think we ought to have two more tableaux. A bathing costume, and then a finale, almost nothing. Just two pieces of silk. It would be a sensation.'

'Oh no,' Purchase said. 'Oh no.'

'Why not?'

'No, I've always kept the show decent. It's always been a clean show. I can't do it. No.'

'Try it.'

'No. Purchase's Living Wonders has got a reputation for being a decent show. And it's going to keep it. A lot of children come to it.'

'What if they do? You can call it the undressed doll or something. They'll like that.'

'No.'

'We'll rehearse it,' she said. 'Just try it out. Just see how I look.'

Finally he agreed to that. And in spite of himself he was impressed. In the final tableau, when she was virtually undressed, her small body was perfect. Her breasts stood out like little tea-cups, and altogether, with the strips of pink silk toning into the colour of her body, she looked exactly like an undressed china doll. All against himself he had had to admit that it transformed the act from something second-rate into a top-line sensation.

Still he did not like it. He had cultivated the fatherly church-elder idea to perfection and the new act seemed like a cynical contradiction of it. For a long time he would not put

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

it on. Then the summer beat him. It was so hot that the houses began to go down to nothing. He was worried and the whole show seemed stale and listless, and finally he succumbed.

He billed her as Baby Doll: The World's Quickest Quick-Change Midget. And because it seemed safer, he put her half way through the bill, unobtrusively, without any sensation at all. And even then, right up to the very last, he did not like it. He was ready to take her off at the slightest complaint or hitch or unpleasantness. And also because it seemed safer he put her on at a matinée, one Friday afternoon, in a small Midland industrial town the show had never visited before. And all the time he was on edge. For more than an hour before the performance was due to begin he paced about behind the stage in a state of agitation, a man of over six feet and weighing about two hundred pounds, looking more frightened than a rabbit. 'I don't like it,' he kept saying. 'I don't like it. I don't like it at all.'

And even the show that afternoon did not reassure him. He could not tell at all if it had been a success. The audience was thin, the theatre was stifling hot, and there was only a short hush, a desultory breath of surprise, at the last tableau of the Baby Doll act, the change from the bathing costume to next to nothing at all. Still, he was relieved. There was no opposition, no complaint.

Then, that evening, the theatre was almost raided. Queues tailed out into the streets, the doors were almost rushed, he had more people standing than he had had sitting at any performance for two months. People sat on the balcony steps. The audience was almost all factory hands and almost all men, and they had all come to see one thing: the woman with nothing on.

Purchase took more money at that one show than he had taken for a month. It was a god-send. He had never known anything like it.

Nor had the audience. Nor, indeed, had Ida. If it was a sensation for the audience and a god-send for Purchase, for her it was a revolution. And strangely, she felt a little unhappy about it. Until that evening, she had been quite content.

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

She had not wanted to be in the limelight. Success and sensation were both things she had not wanted and had not calculated to have. All that she wanted was to be near Purchase.

He had not for a moment realized it. Otherwise he could not have acted as he did. Directly after her act, with the audience still raising a pandemonium, he went straight to her dressing-room. She stood there dazed and almost exhausted, without triumph and without being aware of the sensation she had been. She had on a red dressing-gown over the two pieces of silk, and when Purchase came in she stood there limp, the dressing-gown undone, almost ready to cry with strain and excitement.

Purchase simply went up to her and put his hands on her shoulders. 'Oh! you darling,' he said. 'You darling. It was great. You're a living wonder if you like. I could kiss you.'

'Kiss me,' she said.

And impulsively, with a kind of avuncular heartiness, he kissed her. She did not move. She stood with the doll-like stillness of her act, so pretty and sweet, an impassive doll, saying nothing. Then Purchase put his arms round her and hugged her, very much like a large bear. Her head came well below his chest. She let it rest there, with a beautiful sensation of rest and achievement that meant more to her than all the sensation of the act could ever have done. 'Hold me a minute,' she said. 'I feel I shall break in half. Just hold me.' And as he held her, in the detached tender fashion of an elderly man, she began to cry, quietly and, though he did not know it, unhappily.

It did not surprise him at all that she should cry. He had often had it happen, to other midgets, at other and similar times of crisis. He felt that it was natural and that in time she would get over it.

But she did not get over it, though he had no suspicion of it. To him it seemed simply that she went on doing her act, triumphantly and sensationally, wherever they went. He had no time to notice whether she had changed or was changing. The act worried him enough, without that. Twice during the

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

next two months he had the police in, and she had to wear an extra slip in the last act. 'The navel mustn't *show*,' the police said. Apart from that she was, as he said, a real living wonder, a sensation everywhere. Purchase raised her salary, billed her at the top, and finally gave her a contract for three more years.

Then, in September, he had a new idea. He was travelling by train, from one show to another with a dozen midgets in the carriage with him reading, the paper. Suddenly he struck the paper with the back of his hand.

'I got it! Look here — here's the man who made the first comics on the film telling how it was custard pies got to be thrown. You remember? Well, he says somebody threw a custard pie and everybody laughed. And that gave him his idea. If one custard pie was funny, wouldn't two be twice as funny? And three, and four, and fifty, and so on?' He got excited. 'You see what I mean? If Baby Doll here is a sensation, what would a row of Baby Dolls be? They'd be a riot! Wouldn't they? You see what I mean? I'd get all of you, all the women, and dress you all the same — all dolls, in a row of boxes.'

He could not understand, for a time, why only he was enthusiastic about it. Then, at the first rehearsal of the new idea, he saw why. Apart from Baby Doll he hadn't a performer who, without clothes, wasn't repulsive and pathetic. They were all monstrosities. He felt sorry for them, angry with himself. And it seemed to be the end of the idea.

Then, almost a fortnight later, when he had almost forgotten it and was glad to forget it, the girl herself had a scheme.

'You could do it,' she said, 'if you had ordinary people. Not little people. If you had two girls a little taller than me, then two taller, then two taller, and so on, until you got two girls almost as tall as you are. Have them in a kind of big V, all dressed alike with me in the middle. You could do it then.'

'My God,' Purchase said. 'By God I could do it, couldn't I?'

'You could. It would be terrific.'

Then he half changed his mind. 'No. I can't do it. I've always stuck to you little folks. It's a separate game from all

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

the rest. You've got to keep midgets together. It's no use. They won't mix. No, I can't do it.'

'Who said they won't mix? If you say so they'll have to. They mix in circuses. I don't mind for myself. Surely the rest won't?'

'Wouldn't they? I don't know. I don't like it.'

But gradually, as before, he came round to it. He'd see. He'd think about it. He might try it. It took all her urging and cajoling to make him listen and see the sense of it. She put all her heart into it. It gave her a good deal of happiness to be able to do something for him. All the time he did not realize it, and she did not show it.

Then he came round. And coming to it at last, he overtook her in enthusiasm. He advertised, went to London and had interviews and auditions. And gradually, that autumn, he got what he wanted, eight girls ranging in pairs upwards, from just under five feet to just over six. It was his idea to bill them, with her, as the Nine Naked Ninepins. It was the only thing she did not like about it. She said it was cheap.

'All right,' he said. 'Suggest something else.'

She suggested nymphs, and he agreed that it was better. So that autumn, after a month of rehearsal, he put them on, the Nine Naked Nymphs, the kind of act that for him was a revolution.

At once it was a terrific success. Before Christmas he had bookings all over the Midlands and the South. Contemplating the immense success of it, looking at the big normal girls standing on each side of the Baby Doll, girls with long graceful legs and fine breasts and faces in which there was no hint of the forlorn midget expression of mockery, he wondered how the old Baby Doll act had ever succeeded in impressing either him or the rest of the world.

Even so he had sense enough to see that it was still she who made it. The big girls threw her into a lovely miniature relief. She was so sweet and doll-like, such a dear creature, a real pink lovable doll in a box. It was she who was the heart of it.

And from time to time he praised her: 'That was a fine

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

idea of yours. A grand idea. You're a real living little wonder. Why, if it hadn't been for you I might still be going on in the same old way.' And he would put his hands on her shoulders and give her a little shake and a squeeze of affection. 'You don't want to go back home, do you? Don't want to leave me?'

No, she didn't want to go back home. She didn't want to leave him. And to express it she would simply stand there and look up at him and shake her head, in dumb adoration. She wanted simply to be near him. That was all. Nothing else. It was a clear and quite uncomplicated desire — uncomplicated by any jealousy or spite or foolishness, and so clear that he ought to have seen it at once. But he never suspected it. The idea of her being in love with him would have been simply ludicrous even if he had thought of it at all.

Then suddenly he did see it. One night, during the second performance, one of the nymphs fainted. She fell forward from her doll's box as stiff as a ninepin, in the middle of the act. Purchase had the curtain rung down and rushed on to the stage and carried her off to her dressing-room himself.

She was a big girl, beautifully built, with platinum hair that was almost white. She had full drowsy lips and in the ordinary light of the dressing-room, away from the footlights, her painted eyes were bright green. The act had got as far as the early Victorian scene and underneath her dress the girl had on four more dresses besides her bathing costume. Knowing that, Purchase loosened her top dress and began to take it off.

'Myra, Myra,' he kept saying. 'Myra, come on now. Come on Myra. You're all right, Myra.'

'Take me home,' she said at last.

'Can't you go on?' he said. 'How do you feel?'

'I feel ghastly. Take me home.'

So, with her dress half off, he took her back to her lodgings in a taxi; on his way out of the theatre he had to push past girls and midgets and stage-hands, and lastly Ida. She just stood by the stage door and stared at him as he went past. But it was such a fixed look, so odd, almost fierce, that he stopped and spoke. 'I'll be back in about ten minutes. You see that

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

the show goes straight on. Straight on as if nothing had happened.'

The show went on, but Purchase was not back when it finished. Ida waited about long after the rest of the company had gone home, but it was no use. Then, after about half an hour, she took a taxi to the girl's lodgings. It was then almost midnight.

At the lodgings the landlady let her in and she went straight upstairs, alone. She came almost straight down again. The girl had a room on the second floor and there was a light in it, but Ida did not go in. She did not even knock. It was almost enough for her to hear Purchase's voice, but not quite enough. By his voice she knew that he was there, in the room with the girl, but she could not tell what he was doing.

After a moment she bent her head and looked through the keyhole. That was enough. The girl was lying on the bed, undressed, and Purchase was kissing her.

She went straight home. Next day she said nothing. But somehow, for the first time, Purchase knew what was in her mind. He felt exasperated. It was so silly. Surely she had the sense to see that there could never be anything between himself and a midget, between her and a normal man? The physical incompatibility of the thing made him shudder. Surely she saw that too?

She did see it, but almost for the first time too. Having seen him with the girl, almost in the very act of love, she saw now quite completely and quite clearly how far she was from him. Formerly she had reasoned that if she was good enough to kiss and squeeze in a friendly way she ought to be good enough to love. She had always hoped. Now there was no hope at all.

Even so, she did nothing. There was very little that she could do. She had no jealousy. She simply went about quietly, dumbly, avoiding Purchase as much as possible. Her heart was full up. All the time Purchase was taking the girl Myra home to her lodgings, night after night, after the last performance.

Then suddenly Ida did exactly what the other girl had done:

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

she collapsed in the middle of the show. Purchase was furious. It was so obvious and silly, so infuriating, such a cheap feminine trick of sensationalism. Angrily he got a taxi and took her to her lodgings. All the way she did not speak. She looked exactly like a wax doll, so white and dumb and bloodless.

In her room Purchase laid her on the bed and covered her over.

'Why did you do that?' he said.

She did not speak.

'You did it on purpose,' he said. 'You did it to attract attention. Didn't you?'

Still she did not say anything.

'Didn't you?' he insisted. 'Didn't you? Say something. You did it on purpose?'

Suddenly he saw why she did not speak. She could not. She was ill. She lay in a momentary paralysis, so white and still that all at once he was afraid.

'Ida,' he said. 'Ida. Baby. What is it? Whatever is it?'

He got hold of her hands. They were stone cold. 'Ida, Ida,' he said. 'What is it? What is it?'

'I don't know.' She spoke suddenly, but faintly.

'How do you feel? Tell me. Tell me and I can get a doctor.'

'I feel so big — like — look, I can touch the foot of the bed.'

'Yes, but how do you feel? Inside? How do you feel?'

'It's my heart.' She was holding his hands very tightly. 'It hurts me.'

He was scared. She looked so cold and white and small. It was beyond his understanding. 'Let me get somebody,' he said. 'Let me get somebody.'

'No, stop here. Don't go,' she said. Then in a minute she said: 'Can you see how big I am? I feel as big as you. I feel enormous. Look at me,' she said. 'I can reach to the foot. Do I look big?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Do you like me any better like this? Big?'

'Yes.'

'How much better?'

PURCHASE'S LIVING WONDERS

He could not speak. She seemed smaller than he had ever known her, the smallest midget in the world.

'Much better?' she said. 'A lot better?'

Purchase nodded. He could not speak, but she seemed satisfied. Very white and still, she looked at him steadfastly, with her tiny doll's eyes in which there was no emotion at all except delight.

'Am I a living wonder?' she said. 'Say I am.'

'Yes,' he said. 'You're a living wonder.'

A moment later she let go his hands, and he knew that he had spoken just in time.

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

IN the dining-room of the Bellevue Boarding House Miss Lomas and Mr. Sanderson ate their fish in silence. They sat at separate tables. They were the only guests. Miss Lomas was somewhere between thirty-five and forty: a woman of medium height with pale brown hair and a reserved, almost apologetic manner, who looked as though keeping to the medium, even the unhappy medium, had been her life's most constant ambition. She had a habit, never varied, of staring out to sea as she ate. Today the rain was coming down in a thin curtain between great islands of cloud shadow and vast blue storms lying over the coast of France. It was already late October, and it looked as if the weather were breaking up at last.

Mr. Sanderson felt that he might say so. He had been at the Bellevue, now, for three days, but Miss Lomas, except to say 'Good morning', or 'Good afternoon', had not spoken to him. She had not even got so far as saying 'Good night'. She looked in some way pre-occupied with melancholy, with herself, with some indefinable and perhaps even unmentionable grievance or difficulty. He himself was not feeling too cheerful either; he had lost his wife, he had not been over-grand all summer. He was rather an upright, handsome man of fifty-two, though he felt, if anything, a little older. Nor was the Bellevue too cheerful. The smell of stale food was so thick and almost sickening everywhere that it was like an anaesthetic. It was perhaps hardly the place, after all, to put him on his feet again.

At last he spoke. 'Well,' he said, in a deliberate voice, 'I rather think. . .'

He got no further. The maid, at that moment, came in to clear the fish plates. He sat silent, playing with the salt. The girl took Miss Lomas's plate. She came over to take his own. It was just then that he made up his mind to say to her what he had wanted to say to Miss Lomas.

'Well,' he said, 'I rather think it looks as if the weather has broken.'

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

'Oh! you never know,' the girl said. 'The autumn goes on a long time here.'

She spoke in a friendly voice, and Mr. Sanderson felt cheered. She was not much more than a girl. He watched her go out of the dining-room, eyes fixed on her slim legs.

She came back with plates of boiled mutton, and then dishes of potatoes and cabbage. All the time Miss Lomas gazed out of the window. They both ate in silence. Miss Lomas's mouth, while she ate, was a mouth with no expression of emotion on it at all — no hunger, no pleasure, no distaste, no annoyance, no weariness, nothing. It seemed to express a personality that was at once upright and negative. So that Mr. Sanderson could not help wondering about her. What was she, what was she doing, why was she so standoffish? She was negative almost to a point of mystery.

And then the pudding came. Before he had realized it Miss Lomas had refused it. Her only sign of refusal was to walk out. She was gone before he could make a gesture.

It began to rain before the girl brought in the coffee. The sea was turned by rain into a stormy expanse of steel, and the afternoon seemed suddenly almost dark, with rain sweeping along in dark gusts that splintered white on the deserted promenade.

'Nice how-d'ye-do,' he said.

'Were you going out?' the girl said.

'Well, I was and I wasn't. I didn't really know what to do. What can I do? You know more about this place than I do?'

'Go to the pictures. Or if it clears up you could walk over to the Flats. It's grand out there. I love it. It's always so grand and windy out there.'

Somehow that didn't seem like a waitress. She spoke nicely, easily, with some sort of refinement.

'Been in service long?' he said.

She stood and grinned at him, openly, almost pulling a face. 'Me? I'm Mrs. Harrap's daughter.'

'Well, I'm blowed.'

'I left school at August. I'm waiting to get a job.'

'Well.' He looked at her. She was pretty, with short yellow

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

hair cut straight, and strong bare arms, and rather a fine high forehead. 'Now I've come to look at you, you're like your mother.'

She laughed; and Mr. Sanderson, less depressed, laughed too, and they were intimate.

'Like being a waitress?'

She just grinned. 'Would you?'

'Don't you get out?'

'Oh! yes. But what can you do in a place like this?'

'That's what I want to know.'

He drank his coffee. The girl watched the rain. Suddenly he thought 'Oh! damn it, why not?' and said:

'If I went to the pictures would you come with me?'

'I would. I'd love it.'

'Good.' He felt suddenly light-hearted. 'That's more than I dare have asked Miss Lomas. Even at my age.'

'She wouldn't come if you asked her.'

'Why not?'

'I don't think she believes in it. In relationships, I mean — man and woman. Even if it's platonic. I think she lives it all in books.' Then suddenly she said. 'If I'm coming with you I'd better fly. I'll meet you at the cinema, shall I? We needn't broadcast it from the house-tops that we're going together.'

'I don't know that we need,' he said.

When he went to get his mackintosh Miss Lomas was just going across the hall and into the drawing-room, with a novel in her hands. She did not speak. She carried herself with the same upright negation as ever. Looking straight before her, she seemed to be looking always towards some kind of spiritual but empty horizon. Her medium spiritless brown eyes had some sort of subdued pain in them. 'Perhaps she suffers from indigestion,' he thought.

Later he said this to the girl. When they met at the cinema the rain had ceased. It was windy, with sudden acres of blue sky and, under the shelter of the white boarding houses on the promenade, an almost hot sun. 'It seems too good to go to the pictures,' she said, and he agreed. 'Let's walk over to the Flats instead.'

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

'All right,' he said, and they walked eastwards out of the town, into a gusty bright afternoon. As they walked, the wind and sun cleared the sky above the sea until the air shone with a kind of lofty radiance. And then, beyond the town, the marsh-land stretched out, yellowish green, the grass still summer-dried, in places almost white with salt. Tufts of sea-pink, half seed, half flower, were still blooming in the drifts of shingle. The girl walked fast. She had no hat, and her hair blew all about her face. She talked a lot, exuberantly, girlishly. She would stop sometimes and point out headlands along the coast, or sea-birds, or churches beyond the rim of marshland. 'I adore it,' she would say. It was her favourite word. And she seemed to carry him along on a succession of flights of adoration.

And then they talked of Miss Lomas. 'She has indigestion,' he said. 'That's her trouble.'

'I don't know,' the girl said. 'She comes to us every winter. This is the fourth winter. She comes when the summer people have gone, and stops till Easter.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes. She just sits and reads, that's all. That's all I ever saw her do.'

'I still think it's indigestion,' he said.

After that, they forgot her. Mr. Sanderson walked along with a great sense of exhilaration. At home he was a draper. It was fine to feel free, to smell sun and sea instead of serge and calico. 'This walk is doing me good,' he said. And then: 'By the way, you never told me your name?'

'Freda,' she said.

'And what's Miss Lomas's name?'

'I never heard it,' she said.

In the late afternoon they rested. They sat down on the very edge of the shore, where hollows of sand were fringed with thin dune-grass and still blue sea-thistle. The girl lay down. He half sat beside her, resting on one elbow. Her hair was almost the colour of the sand. She lay with arms stretched out, her dress tight across her body, her eyes opening and shutting in what seemed to be an ecstasy of mental drowsiness. She

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

seemed to lie there in deliberate invitation to him, so that he felt some kind of stupid eagerness, almost an ache, grow up in him. By that time the afternoon was going quickly. The tide was coming up and the sea losing its light. For two or three minutes he lay and watched the vague passage of ships. Then he turned and looked at the girl again. She looked back, straight, with a frankness of invitation that made him feel almost shocked.

‘You’re slow,’ she said.

Rather stupidly he bent down then and she put her arm up to him. He felt in some way passive, impelled by her. In the end he kissed her, not very well and with a feeling of being out of practice, with consequent stupidity. ‘Come on,’ she said softly. ‘Again. Better than that. A long one. A real one.’ She held her lips still and slightly apart and shut her eyes.

All the way back across the marshland in the sudden twilight, he was troubled by a constant notion that he ought to be careful. ‘She’s only a kid,’ he would think. All the way he walked with his arm round her, closely. It was she who had put it there.

And then, in the town, they separated. He felt rather old and a little tired. Walking in that strong air, with intervals of unexpected passion, had been almost too much for him. He was glad to get back to Bellevue and have a bath and a rest before dinner.

And at dinner only Miss Lomas, as usual, was there; and, as usual, she did not speak. To his disappointment also, there was no sight of Freda. Mrs. Harrap, a jolly, rather assertive woman with ear-rings, brought in the dishes herself. Even for her Miss Lomas had no conversation. And now, since she could not look out to sea, she looked at the venetian blinds, drawn down over the window. There was no difference in her manner. If the horizon itself had been shut out, the spiritual horizon remained, to be everlastingly affixed by her medium brown eyes, with their air of spiritless martyrdom.

He did not see Freda until much later. Miss Lomas had gone to bed and he was in the hall, reading the amusement guide before going himself. The girl came in as he stood there. The

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

house was very quiet and for some moments she not speak. She stood and smiled and then opened the door of the drawing-room and they went inside. It all happened without a word. It was dark and she put her arms about him and kissed him. It was literally she who kissed him. He stood passive, holding her tightly. 'Again,' she would say. 'Tighter, hold me tighter. Please. Tighter.' And he held her and kissed with something of the old feeling of inadequacy, rather stupidly, feeling somehow that he was no match for her.

Then, as they came out of the dark drawing-room, they heard a sound on the stairs above. It was as though someone had moved suddenly away.

'What's that?' he said. 'Somebody watching?'

'It's nothing. What does it matter, anyway?'

After another moment, they said good night. The girl seemed careless, impish. And then going upstairs, he saw that the door of Miss Lomas's room was ajar.

II

It was not until two days later that Miss Lomas spoke to him. In the interval he had twice taken the girl out again, once to the cinema, in the afternoon, and once to the pier, late in the evening. Coming out of the cinema, he had been surprised to see Miss Lomas. With umbrella and mackintosh on her arm, she had been walking rapidly along the promenade, as though in a great hurry to get somewhere. He got ready to raise his hat. And then, suddenly she crossed the street and did not see them at all.

Then, the following day, she spoke to him. He was sitting in the drawing-room, after lunch, reading the paper. He was feeling better in health. He could read and lose himself in what he was reading. And it was pleasant to think of flirting with the girl after all. Suddenly, there was Miss Lomas. She was standing in front of him, ready to speak.

Then, before she spoke, he noticed an odd thing. Her hands

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

were tightly clenched. And she seemed to be looking beyond him. She seemed extraordinarily nervous, and it made him nervous. As he got up he kicked the chair-leg and dropped his newspaper and then hurriedly took off his reading glasses.

'I would like to speak to you,' she said.

'Oh! yes, Miss Lomas,' he said. 'Oh! yes. Good. What was it?'

She was silent. He waited. And then she said, with a kind of righteous, almost comic abruptness.

'I saw you out with that girl.'

He got ready to reply. She went on at once:

'I don't think it right. Secretly. She's only a girl.' She repeated it, as though to convince him. 'I don't think it's right. Your meeting her like that, secretly. It's not right.'

'You mean you don't think it's right,' he said.

'It's the same thing. I don't think it's right.'

'What do you want me to do?' he said.

For a moment she stood still, silent. She was breathing fast, in agitation. There was some kind of explosive dignity about her. Her eyes were no longer in any way medium. They were passionately, almost comically indignant. She was a little short-sighted and it was as though her eyes were not strong enough to sustain any such ferocity of emotion. Then suddenly she burst out. 'Do you expect me to tell you what to do?' and went out.

The whole thing made him feel perverse. He was not more than momentarily angry. That afternoon he went out with the girl again, arranging it deliberately. He told her about Miss Lomas. 'Interfering old cat,' she said, and they had a good laugh about it together.

Then, after dinner that evening, something else happened. He took the evening paper into the drawing-room, prepared and even anxious for trouble. Miss Lomas sat there with her eternal book. He had hardly sat down when she got up and did an extraordinary thing. She apologized.

'I'm sorry about this afternoon,' she said.

He could think of nothing to say. She was very earnest and it was almost comic. He simply stood still and listened while

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

she made efforts, by repetition, as she had done earlier, to convince him.

'I shouldn't have said what I did. I'm very sorry. It was not my business.'

Then he did feel, for the first and only time, momentarily angry with her.

'If it was not your business why did you do it? There's no need to spy on people.'

She just stood silent, as though it were true and as though she accepted it. Her eyes did not change their look of medium stupidity. Except that now it was painful. He could not look at her.

After that there seemed nothing he could say and he left the room and got his mackintosh and went for a walk along the promenade. It was a squally cold evening, with a sharp wind off the sea, and when he got back to the boarding house the drawing-room was empty and he rang for some coffee. Freda brought it.

'I must tell you about Miss Lomas,' he said. 'By the way, where is she? Gone to bed?'

'She went up some time after eight.'

'I must tell you about her. She apologized tonight.'

They went on to talk about it and they had another laugh about her.

'She's not a bad sort,' he said. 'She suffers from indigestion, that's all.'

'She's all right,' the girl said. 'Why don't you ask her to the cinema — just to see what happens. Just to see how she takes it.'

'I thought you said she didn't believe in it?'

'Well, ask her. Just for fun. For a joke,' she said. 'Ask her for fun.'

He put it to Miss Lomas on the following day, casually, rather off-hand. Very much to his astonishment she accepted, and they went in the evening, after dinner. On the way he said something about life being short and there being no reason why they should not be good friends and she said yes, she agreed except that sometimes life seemed rather long. He

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

thought it an odd remark but after that they did not speak much. She had dressed up a little for the occasion: a brown and mauve hat and, underneath her coat, a mauve silk dress. In the cinema she took off her coat and he could see her flat, unbecoming chest that had no shape about it at all. It was a cold evening, but once or twice during the performance she said how hot it was. He thought she seemed restless and afterwards at the boarding house he said so.

'Oh, I'm like that,' she said. 'It was really wonderful.'

And then, as she shook hands before going upstairs to bed, he was amazed to find out how really hot she was. Her hand was damp with sweat. It was as though it had been a kind of exquisite ordeal for her.

And when, after lunch on the following day, Freda wanted to know all about it, he said, joking: 'I think it was a bit too much for her. She got all hot and bothered.'

'She fell for you,' the girl said. 'That's all. You made a hit. She thinks you're Valentino. Very nice.'

They were in the dining-room alone. The girl took a quick look round.

'Kiss me,' she said. 'Now. Quickly,' She kissed him, rapturously, with devilry, and then said: 'And tell me something. Valentino or no Valentino, that's the last time? Or else I shall get jealous.'

'Don't worry,' he said. 'Once with Miss Lomas is enough for a lifetime.'

Almost before he had said it he felt curiously uneasy. He turned quickly round and looked at the doorway. Miss Lomas was standing there. Caught in the very act of listening, she did not move or speak. She made no kind of protest, and after a moment she turned and went quickly back to the drawing-room.

'That's the limit!' the girl said. 'That is the limit. That shows what she is.'

'Yes, that finishes it,' he said.

From that day until he left, a fortnight later, Miss Lomas did not speak to him. It was even, sometimes, as though he did not exist. She lived constantly in that medium spiritless brown

THE CASE OF MISS LOMAS

world in which he had first found her, looking out to sea as she ate, reading eternal novels, gazing at her spiritual horizon beyond the drawn venetian blinds in the evenings. He saw a change only once. Looking up from his paper, unexpectedly, one evening in the drawing-room, he caught her looking at him. She was looking at him with the oddest conflict of emotions: hatred and doubt and despair and what he felt was also a kind of religious devotion. It was as though she were trying to hypnotize him. It filled her ordinarily emotionless eyes with a painful complexity of tenderness and jealousy.

Two days later he left. He said goodbye to Freda on the previous evening. She took it badly. The weather had turned warm, with real soft autumnal humidity, and they lay on the dark beach and kissed a lot until, at last, the girl cried. 'It'll be rotten when you've gone,' she said. 'What shall I do? Why don't you stay? Oh! I'll drown myself or something.'

'Look here, don't talk silly.'

'I will. It'll be so rotten. Why do you have to go?'

'I work for my living. I've got a business. I'll come back. I'll see you again.'

'You won't. You'll forget me.'

'I won't. I'll come. Now be a good girl and kiss me and promise you won't do anything silly.'

There was passion in her kisses, but no promise. All the way home in the train he was worried by stupid fears. She was a dynamic girl and he felt as though he had left her in suspense. Over-charged with passion, she might very well go off into some tragic explosion. Girls did silly things and even, sometimes, killed themselves. He felt, all along, that he had been something of a fool.

A week later he got a letter. It was from the girl herself. It was a long letter, and she enclosed a cutting from a newspaper.

It was Miss Lomas, not she, who had killed herself. It was an awful thing, the girl said, and she did not understand it.

Nor did he understand it himself.

CLOUDBURST

HE woke long before daylight, all hot, in fear of having overslept. The small bedroom was stifling, the candle warm to his touch before he put the match to it. 'Hey,' he said gently. 'Missus. Nell. Missus, rousle up,' and with a kind of dreamy start she woke, the sweat of sleep still on her.

'Can't you lay still?' she said. 'You bin rootlin' about all night. Turn over and lay still.'

'No,' he said. 'Rousle up. It's time we were out. We got that field to mow. That barley.'

Then slowly she realized it. Work, corn. The field. Harvest. Then she realized the heat too, felt it no longer as part of sleep, but as an oppression in reality. The air seemed to drip sweat on her. The candle was like a little furnace. She pushed it away with what was already a tired hand.

Simultaneously her husband got out of bed. He looked, in the candlelight, excessively dwarfed and thin, an old man of bronze bone. Dressed, with blue shirt, leather belt and corduroys, salt-haired, he stood tired, heavy with sleep, dumb. She shut her eyes.

When she opened them again he had gone. Struggling, she got out of bed also, pulled on her clothes clumsily, smoothed her hair. The heat was wet, thunderous. It dripped continually down on her. Then, as she went downstairs with the candle in her hands, it burned up into her face. She was about sixty, very thin, straight-bosomed, and faintly sun-burnt, a stalk of human grass. Downstairs, on the kitchen table, another candle was burning. She set her own beside it. In the better light she saw the time by the alarm on the shelf: four o'clock. Four o'clock, twelve o'clock, four o'clock, five o'clock, eight o'clock, ten o'clock, dark, moonlight. How long was the day to be? She was not thinking. Her mind went round with the clock, stupidly. Like that, not really awake, she poured out tea. Then she cut bread, buttered it, sat down at last. Eating and drinking, she looked

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CLOUDBURST

out of the window. She saw, then, that there were changes in the sky, far distant appearances of creamy golden light, like the unearthly reflections of the candlelight.

'It's gittin' light,' the man said. 'Look slippy.'

Still eating, he got up.

'You all of itch?' she said.

'We gotta be all of itch,' he said. 'I don't like it. It's too hot by half. We get a storm on that barley we're done.'

She said nothing. She knew it: useless to deny it. So she got up, still eating too, and began to prepare food for the day: bread, cold meat, cheese, tea in a can. When that was ready she was ready. She had not washed. She put the victual-bag on her shoulders, locked the house, and went out.

Outside it was almost daylight. The heat steamed. There was a great dew on the roadside grass, a heavy silvering that wetted her big lace-up boots to the sweat-browned tips of the uppers. She walked quickly. By the time she was well out on the road it was light enough to see the colours of the August flowers, red and purple of poppy and knapweed, and then, more distantly, the blue of her husband's shirt as he opened the gate of the barley field.

Then, in the great stillness, long before she had reached the gate, she heard the sound of stone on scythe. It cut the drowsy air in steel discords. It was like the starting up of a rasping engine.

By the time it had ceased she was at the field gate. It was so light, now, that the barley, about five acres of it, was visible like a clean blanket of white, still, rippleless. It stood perfect, flanked by a long patch of scorched-up potatoes on the one side, by roots on the other. And somehow, so white and flawless, it also seemed vast. She could not help standing for a moment, to stare at it.

As she stood there, two things happened. The man began to mow and, almost simultaneously, far away, across distant acres of cut and uncut corn, the sun came up. It was like the sudden opening of a brass eye above the lid of earth.

It was hot from that moment. She rolled up the sleeves of her blouse. The man mowed a swathe, the first trashy

CLOUDBURST

thistle-thick swathe on the edge of the cart track. She took straws from it, quickly and instinctively, combed them straight with her hands, held the ears bunched, tied the first bond, laid it on the earth at last. Barley bonds were awkward. The straw was short, needing to be locked. Wet with dew, it slipped in her hands. So early in the morning, sluggish, stiff, she could not catch the rhythm of the thing. The straws were like steel. She could not twist them. Her own hands were spiritless lumps of bone.

Then the first swathe was finished and another begun. She began to rake, foot under the gathering sheaf, rake light on the straw. Already the world was golden, great-shadowed. But with eyes on the barley and the earth, she hardly noticed it. She was watching how the sheaves would work out: how many to a swathe. At the end of the swathe she looked, but did not count. Some instinct told her that it was fair; that, later, it might be good. Secure in that, she began to go back, bonding the sheaves. For all her age and her sluggishness, she was quick, expert. She worked without premeditation, rapidly. Sheaves began to lie in rows, then in avenues. The stubble took on a new pattern, a great cross-knotting of sheaves, with the fringe of the untied swathe spread out at one end. All the time the man mowed with her own lack of premeditation, her own unconscious fluency. The scythe went sweetly through the barley with the sound of prolonged kissing, the stone swept the steel with ringing discords. They were the only sounds in an empty world.

Then, as the day crept up to seven, heat and silence were one, both intense. There was no breath of wind, only a vast sultriness of wet heat, ominous even so early with a gigantic promise of far thunder. The sun was brassy. The big-cracked earth came up at the touch of rake and feet in small puffs of greyish powder. There was a great sweetness of barley ears, of straw warmed in the sun.

Then, at eight, the man made a sign. His scythe was already on the ground and the woman, seeing it, put down her rake. He began to walk, a moment later, towards her. She got the victual bag as he approached; and in a moment,

CLOUDBURST

and afterwards for about five minutes, they ate and, between mouthfuls of bread and cold bacon, talked.

'I ain't on it,' the man said. 'I don't like it. It seems all of a boil everywhere.'

'You won't stop it,' she said, 'if it does come.'

'It'll come all right. Th' only thing is, we gotta git that barley down afore it does. That's all.'

He was on his feet. She followed him, still eating. 'If this ain't the best bit o' barley we ever had I ain't sharp. We oughta git some pork off a this. This'll make pigs.'

He was off across the stubble before she could think of anything to say. She swallowed her food, tied the victual bag, laid it under a sheaf, followed him.

And now it was hotter than ever. The dew was drying rapidly, the freshness evaporating. The sun stung her on neck and chest and eyes. She felt in it not only the heat of the moment but the promise of the blaze of noon and the bitter scorching of afternoon. The sky was deeply blue, far off, stainless. It was like some great blue burning glass; only, low down, on the horizon, was there any kind of blemish in it: a dark smokiness, tawnily hot, the promise of thunder.

As they worked on, all morning, up to noon, the promise swelled and sweltered into a threat. The heat never cleared. It dripped on them in invisible spots. The man took off his shirt. And the woman, sweat-blinded, would look up to see his back bathed in veins of molten gold.

At noon they ate again, squatting in the hedge-shadow. The day burned white, the barley a flat sheet of unquenchable white flame, the sheaves like smouldering torches, the beards like smoke. Even under the hedge there was a great sweating oppressiveness, without relief, the sun blinding beyond the black tip of shadow. They ate in silence, hardly speaking. They lay and rested with eyes shut. The heat rained on them through the hedge and the shadow. Sweat came out on them in great waves.

They were almost glad to get up and move again, to feel the slight wind made by their own movements, to feel exertion shake off its own sweat.

CLOUDBURST

'We gotta git on,' the man would say. 'I don't like it at all. We gotta git on.'

They worked on mechanically. Heat and barley almost effaced them. They moved like two figures of desperate clockwork. They kept up a changeless rhythm, he mowing, she bonding, which gradually the afternoon forged into iron monotony. Once the woman, looking back, tried to count the rows of sheaves. Her mind fainted. She counted, lost count. The sheaves seemed to dance and quiver as the heat itself danced and quivered over the lip of earth and the hedge. Two, four, six, eight. Twice four are eight, twice eight are barley. All barley. Barley for pigs. Pigs, barley, pigs, barley. Winter, pigs, pork, money. Twice two are pig, twice pig are sixteen. Her mind evolved a series of crazy multiplications. Constant heat and barley and motion made her drunk. Knowing that the barley meant so much, she reached a point, in the middle afternoon, where it and herself and all the world seemed to mean nothing at all.

And about that time there was a shout:

'Hey! You seen that?'

She lifted her eyes. The man was shouting, pointing. Far out, to the south, a vast cloud, tawny and blue, had sprung up out of nowhere.

'It's coming!' he shouted.

'Very like it'll blow over,' she called. 'It looks a long way off.'

'Not it! It's coming. I know. I felt it all day.'

And she knew. Five minutes later, as she looked up again, the cloud had risen up like a tower. It seemed to stand almost over them, an immense dome of strange white and darkness, against a thunderous background of iron and smoke. It was coming. She saw, even as she stood and watched, a great change in the wind currents, a sudden ominous rolling forward of cloud.

'Hey!' She turned. The shout startled her. 'Drop that. We'll git set up. We'll set up and be on the safe side.'

He came half running over the sheaves to her. He stopped only to pick up a sheaf in each arm. Dropping her rake, she

CLOUDBURST

picked up sheaves too. They met, humped the sheaves together, clawed up others, finished the first shock, went on.

'If we git set up it won't hurt so bad,' he kept saying. 'If we git set up —'

He did not finish. There was no need to finish. They had only one purpose: to set up, to make sure, to save. They lumped sheaves together clumsily, running to snatch them up. Not looking or caring, they made a line of shocks that was crazy.

Every now and then, looking up, they saw changes in the approach and form of cloud that were staggering. The sky was suddenly more than half cloud, a great hemisphere of shifting blue and smoke, of silent revolutions of thunderous wind. The sun was not quite hidden. The field was a strange world of stark corn-whiteness and emerald and tawny sunlight.

Then, abruptly, they became conscious that the sun was hidden. The world was instantly stranger, the colours more vivid, the air deathly. There was something like fear in the air, a shadowiness of terror. All the time they were running about the stubble, seizing white sheaves, like two ants hurrying their eggs to safety.

Suddenly the thunder came, the first split and rattle of it over the near fields. It seemed to shake them. The woman stood still. The man got angry:

'Here, here, here! Claw 'em up. Claw 'em up. We got no time to stan' an' gape.'

'That thunder frit me,' she said.

Almost before she had spoken it cracked again, rolling above their heads almost before the lightning had died. She looked instinctively up. The sky was chaotic, awful. The clouds were like the black smoke of some colossal fire. She ran with sheaves in her hands, still half looking up. The barley was dazzling, beautifully white. Suddenly a great silken shuddering and rustling shook the standing beards. It went across the field in a great wave, died in a tremendous stillness. They themselves were the only moving things on earth.

CLOUDBURST

Suddenly a spot of rain hit the woman's hand like a warm bullet and the thunder cracked terrifically even as she lifted one hand to wipe the rain off the other. She stood stock still and a scorch of lightning split the sky before she could move again.

'You run!' the man shouted. 'Git in shelter. Go on! Git in shelter.'

'I'm all right. I —'

'Run!'

She turned and she saw the rain coming. It was coming out of the south, across the already dark fields, like a running curtain. She heard the sound of it, a great rising hissing. In a second, even as she started to run, it was on her, a smashing deluge of white thunder rain that drowned and blinded her.

She ran crazily across the stubble for the hedge and lay, at last, under the big hawthorns. The world was flooded, the barley washed out. She called feebly across the stubble at the figure of the man still staggering about with his puny sheaves, but rain and thunder annihilated her words as they almost annihilated him.

He came at last, a figure of water, a man saved from drowning, his clothes tragically comic. He stood under the hedge and stared. The stubble was flooded, great corn-coloured pools widening and joining and churned up by wind and rain. The nearest growing barley, just visible, was flattened like a mat. The shocks were like roofs torn apart from an earthquake.

'It's a cloud bust, it's a cloud bust,' he kept saying. 'I never see nothing like it. It's a cloud bust. We're done.'

Gradually, between themselves and the shocks, a pool widened into a small lake, with sprouts of stubble coming through it like reeds. They stood as though on an island, in desolation. It rained, all the time, with fury, the thunder turning and returning, the lightning scorching the storm-darkened air with savage prongs of gold. The sheaves became like skirted bodies, floating.

It was almost an hour before there was any brightening of sky, a full hour before there was any lessening of rain. But at

CLOUDBURST

last the man could walk out, boot-deep in water, and stand in the waste of flood and straw and look about him.

In a moment the woman slopped out too, and they stood still.

It was then that the man saw the victual-bag, shipwrecked as it were against the sheaf where the woman had left it, tea-can adrift, bread and meat spewed out and swollen with rain.

'Whyn't you look after things?' he shouted. 'Whyn't you —'

His anger was impotent, useless. It was anger in reality not against her, but against the storm, the ruin. She picked up the victual-bag. Water flowed out of it as out of a net, all over her sodden skirt and legs. She shook it. It hung in her hands like lead.

'That was a good bag! Whyn't you —' The ruin of the bag seemed to hurt him more than anything else. Then his anger squibbed and died, damped out. 'Oh! I don' know! What's the good? What's the use? Oh! I don' know. Look at it. A good bag.'

She clung to the bag, as though in fact it had become precious. They stood and looked out on the waste of flooded water and drowned sheaves. They stood impotent. The man could think of nothing to do and nothing to say but, 'It was a cloud bust. Didn't I tell you? Didn't I say so?' which came finally to mean nothing too.

At last he waded and slopped across the stubble and found his scythe. He could not dry it. It dripped silver. The woman waited, clutching the useless bag in her hands.

Then, after another look at the field, they slushed out of the gate and down the road and away, clutching scythe and bag, like two figures setting out on a pilgrimage to nowhere at all.

THE CAPTAIN

WHEN the Captain and the woman first took the cottage, they looked out for a boy. 'Just a kid to mow the grass and tidy up a bit,' the woman said. At the end of a week they found him. His name was Albert. He was sixteen, one of a large family. He had little black arrogant eyes and a cool way with him and some unconscious habit of looking not quite straight. He was talkative, always on the spot, and the woman liked him from the first. She was amused by his sauce, and he liked to talk to her, bring her little things. He told her of otters one day, five cubs in the river-bank, at the foot of the field beyond the garden, among the meadow sweet. He could bring one. The Captain was listening. 'You ever seen what a dog can do to an otter?' he said.

The Captain himself had a dog, a greyhound, the colour of a field-mouse. It was a sharp, dainty, sensitive creature, and the Captain liked to lie under the apple trees, in the grass, and roll with it and nuzzle its mouth with his two hands and tease it into a pretence of anger. He liked the dog, the boy thought, almost more than the woman. The Captain was a heavy, dark, stiff browed man, about forty, with a way of answering people as though shaken out of an ugly dream. 'Huh! Eh? What? What? Huh?' The woman was rather common, with her fair loose hair drooping about and her flopping poppy-coloured pyjamas, but she was human, warm, with a sugary red-lipped little grin for the boy whenever she met him. At first the boy did not understand them, did not get the relationship. Then once he called her Mrs. Rolfe. 'Mrs. Rolfe! Ha! That's good. Oh, boy! Mrs. Rolfe. No, I'm just Miss Sydney. That's all. Plain Miss Sydney.'

All the week, from Monday to Friday, the boy would be alone, working in the garden, with only the dog for company, and the house locked up. All he had to do was to cut the lawn, trim the quick hedge flanking the lane, sweep the paths, weed the flowers, feed the dog. At first he could not get used to it, with the cottage lying at the dead end of the lane and no one

THE CAPTAIN

coming, the summer days hot and empty, the warm flowery stillness of the little garden almost deathly. He had been used to company. There was not enough to do. And sometimes, in the heat of the day, work finished, he went down in the rough grass among the hazels and beat about for snakes or the young rabbits that scratched under the wire-netting from the field. Bored with that, he would lie half in the potatoes, half in the shade of the empty hen-run, and go to sleep for a bit.

Then when the week-end came again he was excited. He was like a dog himself, joyful, eager to please. He nosed into the house, could not stop talking, followed the Captain and the woman about everywhere, like some little cocky terrier.

He brought the woman a snake. It was a little viper. He had it in a seed-box, with gauze stretched over it, and the snake kept darting up, striking, flicking the gauze. He brought it to the woman as she sat lounging in a deck-chair on the lawn, in her red pyjamas, by herself.

'Look,' he said. 'I got him for you. Look. I caught him.'

The woman saw the small darting head and shrieked. The Captain came running out of the house, hands clenched.

'What's up?' Then he saw the snake. 'Christ almighty, take that damn thing away! Take it away, damn you! Take it away!'

Afraid, the boy stood still, held the box tight, did not know what to do. Suddenly the Captain tore the box from his hands in a rush of passion and flung it away across the grass. The boy saw with small slantwise eyes the snake slithering out over the grass.

A sudden flat-handed blow stunned him for a moment. He could not see. The garden went black, surged to crimson and then went black again. On his right wrist the Captain wore a leather strap, with double buckles. It seemed as if the buckles had made hot prints of pain on the boy's cheek-bone. He stood dumb.

'I'll teach you to scare people. D'ye hear? You hear me? Look. You see that?'

The Captain wore a leather belt round his waist. It was

THE CAPTAIN

heavily buckled. He took it off. He held it loose, like a flat whip.

'You see that? Well! Do you see it or don't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You see it. Good. Next time you'll not only see it but feel it. You understand that? You understand?'

'Leave him alone, George,' the woman said. 'That's enough. He knows. It's all right.'

'Leave him alone be damned. Bringing snakes. What next? What the hell?'

'All right. But let him go. He understands. You understand, don't you?'

'Yes, miss.'

'I just don't like snakes. They scare me.'

'Yes, miss.'

'And what goes for snakes goes for anything else,' the Captain said. 'See that?' He still held the belt. The boy had his eyes half on it and on the thick black-haired wrist. 'And now make yourself damn scarce! Quick!'

The boy went, humble, half watching.

'There's something about that damn kid I don't like,' the Captain said.

'You shouldn't have got the belt,' the woman said.

'Huh! Eh? What? What? Why not?'

'He's only a kid.'

'Kid be damned. Isn't he old enough to know?'

After that the boy was glad to be alone. It was a comfort, the empty week, the hot stillness, and nobody but himself and the dog among the sunflowers and hollyhocks. He liked the small drowsy world, the feeling of being shut off, of having no fear. He felt boxed-up but secure, like the creatures he caught. It had become quite a habit now, since he had so little else to do, to catch something and box it up, half for companionship, half to satisfy in himself some small demon of joy. So at one time he had another snake in a box gauzed over, two fragile lizards in another, a bank vole, reddish-tinted like a fox. He would lie and watch them at the bottom of the garden, in the shade behind the hen coop, out of the hot white edge of

THE CAPTAIN

sunlight, teasing the snake with straws to make it strike, holding the little vole under his hand, half letting it go, then catching it again, like a cat. All the time he wanted an otter cub, but fear held him back: fear of the Captain, of what the dog might do. In consolation he caught a small rabbit; he fell on it in the grass and then kept it in the hen-coop, in the full blaze of sunlight, until it scratched a way out of the soft cake-floor of hen-muck.

Then the week-end came, and he let his creatures go. He was miserable. He watched the Captain, sheered away when he saw him coming. He scarcely spoke to the woman. She gave him her little sugary grins, but he no longer brought her anything.

She saw what was the matter with him. She caught him alone and said, kindly: 'How are your little otters? Do they grow much? Can they see yet?'

'They're all right,' he said.

'Funny, are they? Nice? You said you'd bring me one.' She gave him a little petulant smile.

He brightened. 'So I will,' he said. 'I will. I will. I'll get one. I can get one.'

He came with it the next day. It was Sunday, his day off. He had the little otter in a bird-cage. It lay in one corner, dead frightened, eyes like slate. It never moved. He came in by the back of the house. When he knocked at the door there was no answer. He waited, set the otter and cage down on the path by the fringes of catmint, and listened. Then he heard voices: the Captain's, the woman's, giggling.

The boy went across the lawn towards them, cage in hand. His mind was on one thing: the otter. He had to give it to the woman. She wanted it. She'd asked for it. He had to give it to her.

He got to within the shade of the tree before anything happened. Then the woman suddenly stopped laughing. 'Shut up, you fool. Shut up. There's someone here. It's the kid. Let me go, let me go.'

The Captain sat up, swivelling round on his heavy buttocks. 'Huh! Eh? What? What? Huh?'

THE CAPTAIN

Then he saw the boy. He leapt up in passion, stopped.

'What the blazes you got in that damned cage? Eh?'

'I got the otter, sir.'

'You got what? Didn't I tell you not to bring your damn pets here? Didn't I tell you?'

'It's all right, George, it —'

'You know what I've got a good mind to do to you, eh?' He took a step forward towards the boy, his two hands in his belt. 'Coming here, with your damn pets, disturbing people, Sunday afternoon. What the blazes you mean by it?'

The boy dropped the cage, stood frigid, paralysed. 'It's all right, George. I asked him. I —'

'Then you ought to know better. That damned thing can't live. It's a water animal. Don't you understand? You can't keep it. It'll die, in misery.'

'Well, I —' She stood a little embarrassed, folding her arms, unfolding them, smoothing her white shoulder-straps over her white skin.

'Look at the damn thing,' the Captain said. He kicked the cage round, so that the woman could see the little otter, cringing, terrorized, almost dead, in the corner of the bird-splashed cage. 'Expect that to live? How can it? It's nearly dead already. It wants killing out of its misery. It —'

Suddenly he had an idea. He whistled, called once or twice 'Here! Here! Here!' and then whistled again. In a moment the dog came bounding out from the door-porch, in great leaps over the flower-beds. He stood quivering by the Captain, in delicate agitation, waiting for a command.

'Down, Bounder, down. Down!' the Captain said. He turned to the boy. 'You've never seen what a dog can do to an otter, have you? Down Bounder! Down! Eh? Have you?'

'No, sir.'

'All right.'

Suddenly the Captain bent down and unfastened the cage and took out the little otter and let it run across the grass. 'No, Bounder! No! Down, down!' The otter ran a little way, cramped, crouching. It ran and limped four or five yards. It was small and helpless. The dog stood quivering, watching,

THE CAPTAIN

waiting for the word, his mouth trembling, in pain. Then the Captain shouted. The dog took an instant great leap and was on the otter and it was all over. The otter hung from the dog's mouth like a piece of sodden flannel, and then the dog began to tear it to pieces, throwing it about, ripping it in lust, until it was like a blood-soaked swab.

'Now you know what a dog does to an otter, eh? Don't you? No mistake about that, was there?'

The boy could not speak.

'George, let him go home,' the woman said. 'You go home now,' she said to the boy. 'You go —'

The boy turned to go, white-faced, his eyes half on the woman, half on the dog playing with the bloody rag of the dead otter.

'Wait a minute,' the Captain said. 'You understand this, once and for all? You stop bringing things here. Stop it. We don't want it. And now get out! And when we come next week don't come here on Sunday afternoons, nosing. Behave your damn self!'

The boy turned to go. In a rush of rage the Captain kicked out at him, catching him on the flank of the buttocks. The boy ran, hearing the Captain protest to the woman: 'It had got to die, I tell you. How could it live? It's a water animal, the little fool.'

In the morning the boy was back again early. The Captain and the woman had gone. The garden was still, hot already, the dew drying off.

The boy had a fixed idea. He had worked it out. Nothing could stop it. In the mornings, when he arrived, his first job was to feed the dog. That morning he did not feed it. He let the dog out of the wash-house, where it slept, and the dog bounded about the lawn, sniffing, cocking its leg, coming back to be fed at last.

The boy did nothing. The dog watched him. When he moved, the dog followed him. Then, about nine o'clock, he took the dog down to the hen-coop. Already the sun was hot with a fierce July brassiness, the sky without cloud or wind. The boy opened the hen-coop and put his hand on the floor of

THE CAPTAIN

hen-muck. It was hot. He looked up at the sky. The hen-coop was full in the sun, for the whole day it would be in the sun.

Then the boy called the dog. 'Bounder, Bounder! Rabbits! Look! Fetch'em, Bounder! Fetch'em, fetch'em!'

In an instant the dog tore into the hen-coop. The boy slammed the door. The dog tore round and round for a moment and then stood still. The boy bolted the coop door and went up the path.

When he came back, half an hour later, the dog was scratching frenziedly. The boy had not thought of that. So he rushed back to the toolhouse and came back with a hammer and a small axe. He began to cut short stakes out of bean-poles and hammer them into the ground all round the foot of the coop. The dog stopped scratching and watched him.

Then when the boy had finished, it began its frenzy of scratching again, clouding up grey dust, already terrorized. The boy watched for a moment. Then he got bricks and laid them in a single row alongside the stakes. He was quite calm. His mouth was set. He was sweating.

But he was still not satisfied. He went up to the toolhouse and came back with a spade. Then he chopped out heavy sods of rough grass and piled them over the bricks, hammering them firm down with the back of the spade, until he had built at last a kind of earthwork, heavy and tight, all round the foot of the wire.

Then he stood and looked at the dog. Every time he looked at the dog he hated it. Each time he remembered the otter, saw the bloody piece of flannel being ripped and slapped to bits. His hatred was double-edged. He hated the dog because of the Captain; he hated the Captain because of the dog.

All that day, at intervals of about an hour, he went and looked at the dog. At first it scratched madly. Then it tired. In the afternoon it did nothing. It lay huddled up, as the otter had done, in the corner of the coop. Then, towards the end of the day, it got back its strength. It stood up and howled, barking in fury. Whenever the boy went near it hurled itself about in a great bounding frenzy of rage and anguish.

THE CAPTAIN

All the time the boy did nothing. The next day he did nothing. In the morning, first thing, he was frightened that something had happened, that the dog might have escaped, might be waiting for him. But the dog was still there. He set up a howling when the boy approached. The boy looked at the sods and bricks and then went away.

All that day he did nothing. All morning the dog scratched and leapt about in a kind of indiarubber agony. Then in the heat of the afternoon he quietened again. He lay motionless, abject, tongue out. The boy looked at the tongue. He had an idea that it ought to turn black. He wanted it to turn black.

He wanted the dog to die, but also he wanted it to die slowly. By Wednesday the dog was sick. Heat had parched it, withered it, made an inexorable impression of misery on it. Lean always, it now had the look of a dog skeleton, with the grey skin drum-tight over its ribs. It held its tongue out for long intervals, panting deeply, right up from the heart, in agony. Then the tongue would go back, and the eyes would shine out with dark mournfulness, strangely sick. Then the panting would begin again.

The boy was satisfied. On Thursday he did not go too near the coop. He had some idea that, in time, before death, the dog would go mad. On Thursday he thought he saw the beginning of madness. The dog began to slobber a great deal, a sour yellow cream of saliva that dribbled down its lower lip and dried, in time, in the hot sun, into a flaky scab. By the end of that day the dog had lost all fight. It lay in supreme dejection. It no longer howled. When its tongue fell out, for brief, slow stabs of breath, the boy could see a curious rough muskiness on it, as though the dog had been eating the sun-dried dust of hen-muck. All the time his hatred never relaxed at all: hatred of the dog because of the Captain, of the Captain because of the dog, and all during Thursday he watched for the dog to show its first signs of madness and dying.

He wanted the dog to die on Friday: on Friday because it would leave him clear, free. He could drag the dog out and bury it and then go and not come back. To his way of think-

THE CAPTAIN

ing, it seemed simple. The Captain would be back on Saturday.

On Friday morning he hoped to find the dog dead. It was not dead. It still lay there, against the wire, eyes sick and open, waiting for him. The boy had a spasm of new hatred, really fear, because of the dog's toughness. Then suddenly he saw the tongue come out, slowly, in great pain. It was swollen, almost black. He jumped about, glad. It was black; it was mad. He knew, then, that it was almost the end.

Friday was not so hot. White clouds ballooned over and gave the dog a little rest from heat in the afternoon. By afternoon the boy was afraid. The dog still lay there, strangely still, the deep mad eyes almost closed, the mouth sour-flaked, the tongue terribly swollen. But it was alive, and he could do nothing. Once he got a goose-necked hoe and opened the coop door, holding it half open with his feet. He fixed the dog with his eye. If he could hit it once it would die. Then the dog stirred. And in a second he slammed the door shut with terror.

Then he had another idea. He made a loop with a piece of binder string and let the string down through the mesh of the coop-wire. He let it down slowly, until the loop was level with the dog's head. But the dog, mouth against the floor of the coop, would not stir, so that he could not slip the knot. He called it once for the first time, by its name, 'Boulder, Boulder!' but it would not move.

Then he was frightened. He'd got to kill it. He'd got to finish it. Then he thought of something. He could give it food and poison the food. He could give it bread and rat poison, with water.

He ran up the path. Then he thought he heard something. He stopped and listened. He could hear the noise of a car, braking on the gravel and stopping. He stood paralysed, for about a minute, listening. Then he heard the woman's voice. He could not believe it. Then he heard it again. There was no mistaking it. She was laughing and he heard also, in a moment, the Captain's voice in answer.

The Captain. He could not move. After what seemed a

THE CAPTAIN

great time he heard a shout. It was for him. It was the Captain, bellowing his name.

'Boy! Albert! Boy! Where the devil are you? Where are you? Boy?'

The voice moved him. He began to walk up the path, slowly, in terror, without intention. The dog, hearing the new voice, was making strange whimpering sounds in the coop behind. The boy half ran.

At the crest of the path he slowed down. He could hear footsteps. They were coming towards him. He raised his eyes, so that when the Captain came round the corner his eyes were fixed on him.

In the coop the dog was crying bitterly. And hearing it, the boy stood still.

ITALIAN HAIRCUT

I WAS in a great hurry. I went up the steps to the barber's saloon two at a time. The stairs were iron-tipped and had blue lettered tin plates on every rise: haircutting, shaving, shampoo, saloon, haircutting, and so on, the letters chipped by countless shoe-toes.

'A haircut,' I said.

From the moment I got upstairs I didn't like the place. The saloon was small, boxed-in, cheap. It smelt fiercely of old men and brilliantine. There were bottles all over its cupboards and shelves and wash-basins, pink, lavender, vitriol, green, jaundiced colours, all a little sinister. The whole place was dirty. I didn't like the barber either. He was dirty. It was not his fault: he was sallow, greasy-haired, thick-lipped, a sort of dago.

'You like it long?' he said, 'or short?'

'Medium.'

'Ver' good.'

He was Italian. I didn't like him at all. He didn't seem to like me either. He wrapped the sheet round my neck like a shroud, ramming it into my collar, tight. We might have been enemies. We were alone in the place. And what with the stink of old men, and the dirt, and the odd-looking bottles and his own surly down-look eyes I didn't like it at all. I wanted to get out.

'Just as quick as you can,' I said. 'I've an appointment.'

He didn't say anything. He began working the scissors, without hurrying. He pressed my head forward, suddenly, very hard: so that I was like a man with his head on an invisible chopping block. And with my head down I could see a razor on the rim of the wash-basin. It was open.

Then all at once he stopped clipping. I lifted my head, and we looked at each other in the glass. He was catching hold of my hair, running his fingers through it, making it stand up. He was a big man. He could have lifted me clean out of the

ITALIAN HAIRCUT

chair. I have very light hair and when it stands up I look silly. With his derisive yellow fingers he made it stand straight up, like a comedian's.

'Look at your hair,' he said.

'What about it?'

'My dear sir, only look at it. It's going white. You're losing it.'

'It's a little dry,' I said. 'Certainly.'

'Dry? You use anythink on it?'

'No.'

'It's coming out. You're losing it. Look here, see.' Almost tender now, his derisiveness gone, he wafted my hair about again. 'Fore long you be bald. How old are you? Thirty-three? Thirty-four?'

'Thirty.'

'Oh, dear! Oh, my God!' He took his hand off my head and put it on his own. It was a good gesture, Italian, overdramatic. 'Thirty? Look at me. Look at my hair. Seexty-five. That's what I am. Seexty-five. And as black as — but you can see it. You can see for yourself.'

'Yes.'

'And you, look at you. A young man. And such nice hair. Such lovely hair. Don't you care about it?'

'It's worry,' I said.

'Worry? Who said so? It's not worry. It's nerves. Starvation. You live on your nerves and your hair comes out.'

'I work hard,' I said.

'Work? What work? Pardon, but what work do you do?'

I told him. He changed at once.

'Books? That so? Interesting. Books? My daughter write books.'

'Yes?'

'Yes! She writes books all her life. She write her first book when she was twelve. It was a beautiful book, a sensation. She got seventy-five pounds for it.'

'Good.'

'Everybody wanted her to write for them. Everybody.'

ITALIAN HAIRCUT

She was the craze. She wrote an essay for the gas company. A beautiful essay. The most beautiful essay a child ever wrote. For the gas company.'

'Good.'

'Success everywhere. She could of been famous. And you — what about you? You published anythink?'

'Some books.'

'Oh! Thass encouraging? Encourage you to go on? You make a name for yourself?'

'I may do.'

'You make a name for yourself,' he said, 'and then have hair like this? It's awful shame. Dreadful. Now if you was interested — perhaps you don' care, I don' know — if you was interested I could make your hair look different before you left this shop.'

'You could? How?'

'Wid my treatment.'

I didn't say anything. He clipped my hair a bit, ruffed it, pushed my head about, made a great show of indifference.

'Maybe you ain't interested?'

'What sort of treatment is it?'

'Special. A secret.'

He clipped.

'Of course if you ain't interested.'

'Tell me what you do,' I said.

'Maybe you ain't interested,' he said. 'I don' know. It make no difference. I'm only here to oblige. I ain't the boss. I don't get nothing out of it. In the summer I work in Brighton. Twenty pound a week. I don't get nothing out of the treatment. I ain't the boss.'

He took up the razor.

'Maybe you ain't interested?'

'I want to know what you're going to do.' Just then I wanted to know very much what he was going to do.

He flickered the razor. I didn't like it at all.

'It's electric. Electric must pass through my body. And then I massage wid ointment. Wid special stuff.'

'And how much?'

ITALIAN HAIRCUT

'Maybe you ain't interested. I don' know. Five an' six. You don' want to be bald, do you?'

'And how long does it take?'

All the time he was flashing the razor.

'Five minute.'

'You're sure?'

'Sure. Five minute. A young man like you, going white. At thirty. You don' want to be white, do you?'

'I've got an appointment,' I said.

'It won't take five minute. Sure. You won't regret it. You don' want to be bald, do you?'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll have it.'

'Good. Thass fine.' He went dashing round the screen, out of sight. I heard him tramping about. He came back with great alacrity, carrying a box. It had long lines of flex running out of it, and switches on it, like some antique wireless set. He plugged in. The box was black, a little sinister. I didn't like it at all.

'Jus' take your feet off the iron,' he said. I took my feet off the footrest. 'Jus' in case,' he said. He had become extraordinarily cheerful. 'You don't want to be contacted? Just hold that.' It was a kind of handle, of ebonite. I held it under the sheet, with the wires connected.

'Does it hurt?' I said.

'Hurt? No. A little. Not much. A bit of tickling. Thass all.'

'It's safe, isn't it?'

'Oh! It's O.K. If anybody's going to be electrocuted it's me. Oh! You won't regret it. You don't want to be bald, do you?'

He suddenly switched on and attacked me. His fingers danced on my head like springs. My scalp jumped with pins and needles. He attacked me until the sweat stood like grease on his face.

'Yes, my daughter write books. Wonderful. After she write for the gas company she could do anything. It don't hurt? You're all right? You won't regret it. And then I made her give it up. Altogether. She could of written for

ITALIAN HAIRCUT

anybody. She write wonderful stuff. Stories, essays. Anything. She got genius.'

'Why did you make her give it up?'

'You know what they done? It don't hurt? Them editors? You know what they done? What I find out?'

'What?'

'The lousy — they sent her scarves. Bits of ribbon. Anythink. Trinkets. I ain't a fool. The child was sitting up all night — writing that beautiful stuff. And all they sent her was scarves. I would of been a fool, wouldn't I, to of let her go on?'

He was still massaging, the electricity dancing on my head like springs.

'You know I'm right, ain't I? Ain't that what they do? Send scarves. There ain't no money in it. Kipling perhaps, people like that — it's all right. But for people like you and my daughter it's different. Thass right? You know it is, don't you?'

'My hands have gone dead,' I told him.

'Gone dead? You don't feel well?' He rushed to the switch and cut off.

'It's all right. How much longer?'

'Five minute.'

He rushed about. My hair now stood up, as in a caricature of fear. I looked like a wild man. He came back with a hot towel, wrapped it round my head, and I sat like a potentate with white turban.

'You feel all right? One day you'll come back and thank me. You'll have beautiful hair one day.'

'Just after this?'

'Oh! no, no, no. You gotta persevere. I make you up some ointment, and some spirit. My own recipe. You put that on.'

'How much is that?'

'Ointment. Thass five an' six.'

He took off the towel. My head felt beautiful: fresh and yet on fire. He rushed away with the towel and came back with a bright blue bottle. He was shaking it.

'How much longer?' I said.

ITALIAN HAIRCUT

'Five minute. I just put this on.'

The bottle had 'chloroform' on it. I didn't like it at all. Suddenly he poured it on my head, and it was as though my hair had gone up in flame. The effect was terrific, a hot pain driving right down to the roots of my hair.

'You take a bottle of this,' he said. 'And the ointment. And persevere.'

'By God, how much is that?' I said.

'The spirit? Thass forty-two an' six.'

'I'll take the ointment.'

'You want both. I'll charge you ten shilling for the spirit.'

'No. I'll leave it.'

He became suddenly very nice, beaming, the real Italian, his voice sweet.

'Is it a question of cash?'

'Oh! no.'

'If it's a question of cash, don't let it worry you.'

'No, I won't take it.'

'I tell you what. I won't charge you for the ointment. You take the spirit and the ointment and you come in some other time.'

'No.'

'I tell you what. I won't charge you for the spirit. Only the ointment. Because I'm interested in you. You can't afford it, can you? I know. I don't care. I know, because of my daughter. The lousy —— sending her scarves! For that beautiful work. You needn't wonder I wouldn't let her go on? You see, I understand.'

'No. How much does it come to?'

'You mean? — you take the spirit?'

'No.'

'Take it if you like. I trust you. I ain't the boss. I don't care.'

'Only the ointment.'

'O.K. Thass twelve an' eightpence. Wid the haircut.'

I gave him thirteen shillings. He brushed my coat. 'One day you'll come back and thank me. You will. I ain't like one of them editors. Don't give nothing in return. Your

ITALIAN HAIRCUT

hair looks better already. Beautiful. It'll be so thick and beautiful.'

'What time is it?' I said. 'How long have you been?'

'Five minute.'

I rushed out.

It's no use. Somehow my hair is as bad as ever.

THE KIMONO

IT was the second Saturday of August, 1911, when I came to London for the interview with Kersch and Co. I was just twenty-five. The summer had been almost tropical.

There used to be a train in those days that got into St. Pancras, from the North, about ten in the morning. I came by it from Nottingham, left my bag in the cloakroom and went straight down to the City by bus. The heat of London was terrific, a white dust heat, thick with horse dung. I had put on my best suit, a blue serge, and it was like a suit of gauze. The heat seemed to stab at me through it.

Kersch and Co. were very nice. They were electrical engineers. I had applied for a vacancy advertised by them. That morning I was on the short list and Mr. Alexander Kersch, the son, was very nice to me. We talked a good deal about Nottingham and I asked him if he knew the Brownsons, who were prominent Congregationalists there, but he said no. Everyone in Nottingham, almost, knew the Brownsons, but I suppose it did not occur to me in my excitement that Kersch was a Jew. After a time he offered me a whisky and soda, but I refused. I had been brought up rather strictly, and in any case the Brownsons would not have liked it. Finally, Mr. Kersch asked me if I could be in London over the week-end. I said yes, and he asked me at once to come in on Monday morning. I knew then that the job was as good as settled and I was trembling with excitement as I shook hands and said goodbye.

I came out of Kersch and Co. just before twelve o'clock. Their offices were somewhere off Cheapside. I forget the name of the street. I only remember, now, how very hot it was. There was something un-English about it. It was a terrific heat, fierce and white. And I made up my mind to go straight back to St. Pancras and get my bag and take it to the hotel the Brownsons had recommended to me. It was so hot that I did not want to eat. I felt that if I could get my room and wash and rest it would be enough. I could

THE KIMONO

eat later. I would go up West and do myself rather well.

Pa Brownson had outlined the position of the hotel so well, both in conversation and on paper, that when I came out of St. Pancras with my bag I felt I knew the way to the street as well as if it had been in Nottingham. I turned east and then north and went on turning left and then right, until finally I came to the place where the street with the hotel ought to have been. It wasn't there. I couldn't believe it. I walked about a bit, always coming back to the same place again in case I should get lost. Then I asked a baker's boy where Midhope Street was and he didn't know. I asked one or two more people, and they didn't know either. 'Wade's Hotel,' I would say, to make it clearer, but it was no good. Then a man said he thought I should go back towards St. Pancras a bit, and ask again, and I did.

It must have been about two o'clock when I knew that I was pretty well lost. The heat was shattering. I saw one or two other hotels but they looked a bit low class and I was tired and desperate.

Finally I set my bag down in the shade and wiped my face. The sweat on me was filthy. I was wretched. The Brownsons had been so definite about the hotel and I knew that when I got back they would ask me if I liked it and all about it. Hilda would want to know about it too. Later on, if I got the Kersch job, we should be coming up to it for our honeymoon.

At last I picked up my bag again. Across the street was a little sweet shop and café, showing ices. I went across to it. I felt I had to have something.

In the shop a big woman with black hair was tinkering with the ice-cream mixer. Something had gone wrong. I saw that at once. It was just my luck.

'I suppose it's no use asking for an ice?' I said.

'Well, if you wouldn't mind *waiting*.'

'How long?'

'As soon as ever I get this nut fixed on and the freezer going again. We've had a breakdown.'

'All right. You don't mind if I sit down?' I said.

THE KIMONO

She said no, and I sat down and leaned one elbow on the tea-table, the only one there was. The woman went on tinkering with the freezer. She was a heavy woman, about fifty, a little swarthy, and rather masterful to look at. The shop was stifling and filled with a sort of yellowish-pink shade cast by the sun pouring through the shop blind.

'I suppose it's no use asking you where Midhope Street is?' I said.

'Midhope Street,' she said. She put her tongue in her cheek, in thought. 'Midhope Street, I ought to know that.'

'Or Wade's Hotel.'

'Wade's Hotel,' she said. She wriggled her tongue between her teeth. They were handsome teeth, very white. 'Wade's Hotel. No. That beats me.' And then: 'Perhaps my daughter will know. I'll call her.'

She straightened up to call into the back of the shop. But a second before she opened her mouth the girl herself came in. She looked surprised to see me there.

'Oh, here you are, Blanche! This gentleman here is looking for Wade's Hotel.'

'I'm afraid I'm lost,' I said.

'Wade's Hotel,' the girl said. She too stood in thought, running her tongue over her teeth, and her teeth too were very white, like her mother's. 'Wade's Hotel. I've seen that somewhere. Surely?'

'Midhope Street,' I said.

'Midhope Street.'

No, she couldn't remember. She had on a sort of kimono, loose, with big orange flowers all over it. I remember thinking it was rather fast. For those days it was. It wouldn't be now. And somehow, because it was so loose and brilliant, I couldn't take my eyes off it. It made me uneasy, but it was an uneasiness in which there was pleasure as well, almost excitement. I remember thinking she was really half undressed. The kimono had no neck and no sleeves. It was simply a piece of material that wrapped over her, and when suddenly she bent down and tried to fit the last screw on to the freezer the whole kimono fell loose and I could see her body.

THE KIMONO

At the same time something else happened. Her hair fell over her shoulder. It was the time of very long hair, the days when girls would pride themselves that they could sit on their pig-tails, but hers was the longest hair I had ever seen. It was like thick jet-black cotton-rope. And when she bent down over the freezer the pig-tail of it was so long that the tip touched the ice.

'I'm so sorry,' the girl said. 'My hair's always getting me into trouble.'

'It's all right. It just seems to be my unlucky day, that's all.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'Will you have a cup of tea?' the woman said. 'Instead of the ice? Instead of waiting?'

'That's it, Mother. Get him some tea. You *would* like tea, wouldn't you?'

'Very much.'

So the woman went through the counter-flap into the back of the shop to get the tea. The girl and I, in the shop alone, stood and looked at the freezer. I felt queer in some way, uneasy. The girl had not troubled to tighten up her kimono. She let it hang loose, anyhow, so that all the time I could see part of her shoulder and now and then her breasts. Her skin was very white, and once when she leaned forward rather further than usual I could have sworn that she had nothing on at all underneath.

'You keep looking at my kimono,' she said. 'Do you like it?'

'It's very nice,' I said. 'It's very nice stuff.'

'Lovely stuff. Feel of it. Go on. Just feel of it.'

I felt the stuff. For some reason, perhaps it was because I had had no food, I felt weak. And she knew it. She must have known it. 'It's lovely stuff. Feel it. I made it myself.' She spoke sweetly and softly, in invitation. There was something electric about her. I listened quite mechanically. From the minute she asked me to feel the stuff of her kimono I was quite helpless. She had me, as it were, completely done up in the tangled maze of the orange and green of its flowers and leaves.

THE KIMONO

'Are you in London for long? Only today?'

'Until Monday.'

'I suppose you booked your room at the hotel?'

'No. I didn't book it. But I was strongly recommended there.'

'I see.'

That was all, only 'I see'. But in it there was something quite maddening. It was a kind of passionate veiled hint, a secret invitation.

'Things were going well,' I said, 'until I lost my way.'

'Oh!'

'I came up for an interview and I got the job. At least I think I got the job.'

'A bit of luck. I hope it's a good one?'

'Yes,' I said. 'It is. Kersch and Co. In the City.'

'Kersch and Co.?' she said. 'Not really? Kersch and Co.?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Why, do you know them?'

'Know them? Of course I know them. Everybody knows them. That is a bit of luck for you.'

And really I was flattered. She knew Kersch and Co.! She knew that it was a good thing. I think I was more pleased because of the attitude of the Brownsons. Kersch and Co. didn't mean anything to the Brownsons. It was just a name. They had been rather cold about it. I think they would have liked me to get the job, but they wouldn't have broken their hearts if I hadn't. Certainly they hadn't shown any excitement.

'Kersch and Co.,' the girl said again. 'That really is a bit of luck.'

Then the woman came in with the tea. 'Would you like anything to eat?'

'Well, I've had no dinner.'

'Oh! No wonder you look tired. I'll get you a sandwich. Is that all right?'

'Thank you.'

So the woman went out to get the sandwich, and the girl and I stayed in the shop again, alone.

'It's a pity you booked your room at the hotel,' she said.

THE KIMONO

'I haven't booked it,' I said.

'Oh! I thought you said you'd *booked* it. Oh! My fault. You *haven't* booked it?'

'No. Why?'

'We take people in here,' she said. 'Over the café. It's not central of course. But then we don't charge so much.'

I thought of the Brownsons. 'Perhaps I ought to go to the hotel,' I said.

'We charge three and six,' she said. 'That isn't much, is it?'

'Oh, no!'

'Why don't you just come up and see the room?' she said. 'Just come up.'

'Well. . . .'

'Come up and see it. It won't eat you.'

She opened the rear door of the shop and in a moment I was going upstairs behind her. She was not wearing any stockings. Her bare legs were beautifully strong and white. The room was over the café. It was a very good room for three and six. The new wall-paper was silver-leaved and the bed was white and looked cool.

And suddenly it seemed silly to go out into the heat again and wander about looking for Wade's Hotel when I could stay where I was.

'Well, what do you think of it?' she said.

'I like it.'

She sat down on the bed. The kimono was drawn up over her legs and where it parted at her knees I could see her thighs, strong and white and softly disappearing into the shadow of the kimono. It was the day of long rather prim skirts and I had never seen a woman's legs like that. There was nothing between Hilda and me beyond kissing. All we had done was to talk of things, but there was nothing in it. Hilda always used to say that she would keep herself for me.

The girl hugged her knees. I could have sworn she had nothing on under the kimono.

'I don't want to press you,' she said, 'but I do wish you'd stay. You'd be our first let.'

THE KIMONO

Suddenly a great wave of heat came up from the street outside, the fierce, horse-smelling, dust-white heat of the earlier day, and I said:

'All right. I'll stay.'

'Oh, you angel!'

The way she said that was so warm and frank that I did not know what to do. I simply smiled. I felt curiously weak with pleasure. Standing there, I could smell suddenly not only the heat but the warmth of her own body. It was sweetish and pungent, the soft odour of sweat and perfume. My heart was racing.

Then suddenly she got up and smoothed the kimono over her knees and thighs.

'My father has just died, you see,' she said. 'We are trying this for a living. You'll give us a start.'

Somehow it seemed too good to be true.

II

I know now that it was. But I will say more of that later, when the time comes.

That evening I came down into the shop again about six o'clock. I had had my tea and unpacked my things and rested. It was not much cooler, but I felt better. I was glad I had stayed.

The girl, Blanche, was sitting behind the counter, fanning herself with the broken lid of a sweet-box. She had taken off her kimono and was wearing a white gauzy dress with a black sash. I was disappointed. I think she must have seen that, because she pouted a bit when I looked at her. In turn I was glad she pouted. It made her lips look full-blooded and rich and shining. There was something lovely about her when she was sulky.

'Going out?' she said.

'Yes,' I said. 'I thought of going up West and celebrating over Kersch and Co.'

'Celebrating? By yourself?'

THE KIMONO

'Well,' I said. 'I'm alone. There's no one else.'

'Lucky you.'

I knew what she meant in a moment. 'Well,' I said, almost in a joke, 'why don't you come?'

'Me?' she said, eyes wide open. 'You don't mean it. Me?'

'I do,' I said. 'I do mean it.'

She got up. 'How long can you wait? I'll just change my dress and tell mother.'

'No hurry at all,' I said, and she ran upstairs.

I have said nothing about how old she was. In the kimono she looked about twenty, and in the white dress about the same age, perhaps a little younger. When she came down again that evening she looked nearer twenty-six or twenty-seven. She looked big and mature. She had changed from the white dress into a startling yellow affair with a sort of black coatee cut away at the hips. It was so flashy that I felt uneasy. It was very tight too: the skirt so tight that I could see every line of her body, the bodice filled tight in turn with her big breasts. I forget what her hat was like. I rather fancy I thought it was rather silly. But later she took it off.

'Well, where shall we go?' she said.

'I thought of going up West and eating and perhaps dropping in to hear some music.'

'Music. Isn't that rather dull?'

'Well, a play then.'

'I say,' she said, 'don't let's go up West. Let's go down to the East End instead. We can have some fun. It'll do you good to see how the Jews live. If you're going to work for a firm of Jews you ought to know something about them. We might have some Jewish food. I know a nice place.'

So we took a bus and went. In the Mile End Road we had a meal. I didn't like it. The food didn't smell very nice. It was spiced and strong and rather strange to eat. But Blanche liked it. Finally she said she was thirsty. 'Let's go out of here and have a drink somewhere else,' she said. 'I know a place where you can get beautiful wine, cheap.' So we went from that restaurant to another. We had some

THE KIMONO

cheese and a bottle of wine — asti, I think it was. The place was Italian. The evening was stifling and everywhere people were drinking heavily and fanning themselves limply against the heat. After the wine I began to feel rather strange. I wasn't used to it and I hardly knew what I was doing. The cheese was rather salt and made me thirsty. I kept drinking almost unconsciously and my lips began to form syllables roundly and loosely. I kept staring at Blanche and thinking of her in the kimono. She in turn would stare back and we played a kind of game, carrying on a kind of conversation with glances, burning each other up, until at last she said:

'What's your name? You haven't told me yet.'

'Arthur,' I said. 'Arthur Lawson.'

'Arthur:'

The way she said it set my heart on fire. I just couldn't say anything: I simply sat looking at her. There was an intimacy then, at that moment, in the mere silences and glances between us, that went far beyond anything I had known with Hilda.

Then she saw something on the back of the menu that made her give a little cry.

'Oh, there's a circus! Oh, let's go! Oh, Arthur, you must take me.'

So we went there too. I forget the name of the theatre and really, except for some little men and women with wizened bird faces and beards, there is nothing I remember except one thing. In the middle of the show was a trapeze act. A girl was swinging backwards and forwards across the stage in readiness to somersault and the drum was rolling to rouse the audience to excitement. Suddenly the girl shouted 'I can't do it!' and let loose. She crashed down into the stalls and in a minute half the audience were standing up in a pandemonium of terror.

'Oh! Arthur, take me out.'

We went out directly. In those days women fainted more often and more easily than they do now, and I thought Blanche would faint too. As we came out into the street she leaned against me heavily and clutched my arm.

THE KIMONO

'I'll get a cab and take you home,' I said.

'Something to drink first.'

I was a bit upset myself. We had a glass of port in a public house. It must have been about ten o'clock. Before long, after the rest and the port, Blanche's eyes were quite bright again.

Soon after that we took the cab and drove home. 'Let me lean against you,' she said. I took her and held her. 'That's it,' she said. 'Hold me. Hold me tight.' It was so hot in the cab that I could hardly breathe and I could feel her face hot and moist too. 'You're so hot,' I said. She said it was her dress. The velvet coatee was too warm. 'I'll change it as soon as I get home,' she said. 'Then we'll have a drink. Some ice-cream in lemonade. That'll be nice.'

In the cab I looked down at her hair. It was amazingly black. I smiled at it softly. It was full of odours that were warm and voluptuous. But it was the blackness of it that was so wonderful and so lovely.

'Why do they call you Blanche?' I said. 'When you're so black. Blanche means white.'

'How do you know I'm not white underneath?' she said.

I could not speak. No conversation I had ever had with a woman had ever gone within miles of that single sentence. I sat dead, my heart racing. I did not know what to do. 'Hold me tight,' she said. I held her and kissed her.

I got out of the cab mechanically. In the shop she went straight upstairs. I kept thinking of what she had said. I was wild with a new and for me a delicious excitement. Downstairs the shop was in darkness and finally I could not wait for her to come down again. I went quietly upstairs to meet her.

She was coming across the landing as I reached the head of the stairs. She was in the kimono, in her bare feet.

'Where are you?' she said softly. 'I can't see you.' She came a second later and touched me.

'Just let me see if mother has turned your bed back,' she whispered.

She went into my bedroom. I followed her. She was

THE KIMONO

leaning over the bed. My heart was racing with a sensation of great longing for her. She smoothed the bed with her hands and, as she did so, the kimono, held no longer, fell right apart.

And as she turned again I could see, even in the darkness, that she had nothing on underneath it at all.

III

On the following Monday morning I saw Kersch and Co. again and in the afternoon I went back to Nottingham. I had been given the job.

But curiously, for a reason I could not explain, I was no longer excited. I kept thinking of Blanche. I suppose, what with my engagement to Hilda Brownson and so on, I ought to have been uneasy and a little conscience-stricken. I was uneasy, but it was a mad uneasiness and there was no conscience at all in it. I felt reckless and feverish, almost desperate. Blanche was the first woman I had known at all on terms of intimacy, and it shattered me. All my complacent values of love and women were smashed. I had slept with Blanche on Saturday night and again on Sunday and the effect on me was one of almost catastrophic ecstasy.

That was something I had never known at all with Hilda. I had never come near it. I am not telling this, emphasizing the physical side of it and singling out the more passionate implications of it, merely for the sake of telling it. I want to make clear that I had undergone a revolution: a revolution brought about, too, simply by a kimono and a girl's bare body underneath it. And since it was a revolution that changed my whole life it seems to me that I ought to make the colossal effect of it quite clear, now and for always.

I know, now, that I ought to have broken it off with Hilda at once. But I didn't. She was so pleased at my getting the Kersch job that to have told her would have been as cruel as taking away a doll from a child. I couldn't tell her.

A month later we were married. My heart was simply not

THE KIMONO

in it. I was not there. All the time I was thinking of and, in imagination, making love to Blanche. We spent our honeymoon at Bournemouth in September. Kersch and Co. had been very nice and the result was that I was not to take up the new appointment until the twenty-fifth of the month.

I say appointment. It was the word the Brownsons always used. From the very first they were not very much in love with my going to work in London at all and taking Hilda with me. I myself had no parents, but Hilda was their only child. That put what seemed to me a snobbish premium on her. They set her on a pedestal. My job was nothing beside Hilda. They began to dictate what we should do and how and where we ought to live, and finally Mrs. Brownson suggested that we all go to London and choose the flat in which we were to live. I objected. Then Hilda cried and there was an unpleasant scene in which Pa Brownson said that he thought I was unreasonable and that all Mrs. Brownson was trying to do was to ensure that I could give Hilda as good a home as she had always had. He said something else about God guiding us as He had always guided them. We must put our trust in God. But God or no God, I was determined that if we were going to live in a flat in London the Brownsons shouldn't choose it. I would choose it myself. Because even then I knew where, if it was humanly possible, I wanted it to be.

In the end I went to London by myself. I talked round Hilda, and Hilda talked round her mother, and her mother, I suppose, talked round her father. At any rate I went. We decided on a flat at twenty-five shillings a week if we could get it. It was then about the twentieth of September.

I went straight from St. Pancras to Blanche. It was a lovely day, blue and soft. It was a pain for me merely to be alive. I got to the shop just as Blanche was going out. We almost bumped into each other.

'Arthur!'

The way she said it made me almost sick with joy. She had on a tight fawn costume and a little fussy brown hat. 'Arthur! I was just going out. You just caught me. But mother can

THE KIMONO

go instead. Oh! Arthur.' Her mother came out of the back room and in a minute Blanche had taken off her hat and costume and her mother had gone out instead of her, leaving us alone in the shop.

We went straight upstairs. There was no decision, no asking, no consent in it at all. We went straight up out of a tremendous equal passion for each other. We were completely in unison, in desire and act and consummation and everything. Someone came in the shop and rang the bell loudly while we were upstairs, but it made no difference. We simply existed for each other. There was no outside world. She seemed to me then amazingly rich and mature and yet sweet. She was like a pear, soft and full-juiced and overflowing with passion. Beside her Hilda seemed like an empty eggshell.

I stayed with the Hartmans that night and the next. There were still three days to go before the Kersch job began. Then I stayed another night. I telegraphed Hilda, 'Delayed. Returning certain tomorrow.'

I never went. I was bound, heart and soul, to Blanche Hartman. There was never any getting away from it. I was so far gone that it was not until the second day of that second visit that I noticed the name Hartman at all.

'I'm going to stay here,' I said to Blanche. 'Lodge here and live with you. Do you want me?'

'Arthur, Arthur.'

'My God,' I said. 'Don't.' I simply couldn't bear the repetition of my name. It awoke every sort of fierce passion in me.

Then after a time I said: 'There's something I've got to tell you.'

'I know,' she said. 'About another girl. It doesn't matter. I don't want to hear. I could tell you about other men.'

'No, but listen,' I said. 'I'm married.' I told her all about Hilda.

'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'It makes no difference. You could be a Mormon and it wouldn't matter.'

And after that, because it mattered nothing to her, it

THE KIMONO

mattered nothing to me. There is no conscience in passion. When I did think of Hilda and the Brownsons it was like the squirt of a syphon on to a blazing furnace. I really had no conscience at all. I walked out of one life into another as easily as from one room into another.

The only difficulty was Kersch and Co. It was there that Hilda would inquire for me as soon as I failed to turn up.

Actually I got out of the Kersch difficulty as easily as I got out of the rest. I didn't go back there either.

I V

I went on living with Blanche until the war broke out. I got another job. Electrical engineers were scarcer in those days. Then, as soon as the war broke out, I joined up.

In a way it was almost a relief. Passion can go too far and one can have too much of it. I was tired out by a life that was too full of sublimity. It was not that I was tired of Blanche. She remained as irresistible to me as when I had first seen her in the green and orange kimono. It was only that I was tired of the constant act of passion itself. My spirit, as it were, had gone stale and I needed rest.

The war gave it me. As soon as I came home for my first leave I knew it was the best thing that could have happened to me. Blanche and I went straight back to the almost unearthly plane of former intimacy. It was the old almost catastrophic ecstasy.

I say almost catastrophic. Now, when I think of it, I see that it was really catastrophic. One cannot expect a woman to feed off the food of the gods and then suddenly, because one man among a million is not there, to go back on a diet of nothing at all. I am trying to be reasonable about this. I am not blaming Blanche. It is the ecstasy between us that I am blaming. It could not have been otherwise than catastrophic.

I always think it odd that I did not see the catastrophe coming before it did. But perhaps if I had seen it coming

THE KIMONO

it would have ceased to be a catastrophe. I don't know. I only know that I came home in 1917, unexpectedly, and found that Blanche was carrying on with another man.

I always remembered that Mrs. Hartman looked extraordinarily scared as I walked into the shop that day. She was an assured, masterful woman and it was not at all like her to be scared. After a minute or so I went upstairs and in my bedroom a man was just buttoning up his waistcoat. Blanche was not there, but I understood.

I was furious, but the fury did not last. Blanche shattered it. She was a woman to whom passion was as essential as bread. She reminded me of that. But she reminded me also of something else. She reminded me that I was not married to her.

'But the moral obligation!' I raged.

'It's no good,' she said. 'I can't help it. It's no more than kissing to me. Don't be angry, honey. If you can't take me as I am you're not bound to take me at all.'

And in the end she melted my fury. 'What's between us is different from all the rest,' she said. I believed her and she demonstrated it to me too. And I clung to that until the end of the war.

But when I came home finally it had gone further than that. There was more than one man. They came to the shop, travellers in the sweet-trade, demobilized young officers with cars. They called while I was at my job.

I found out about it. This time I didn't say anything. I did something instead. I gave up what the Brownsons would have called my appointment.

'But what have you done that for?' Blanche said.

'I can't stand being tied by a job any more,' I said. 'I'll work here. We'll develop the shop. There's money in it.'

'Who's going to pay for it?'

'I will.'

Just before I married Hilda I had nearly a hundred and fifty pounds in the bank. I had had it transferred to a London branch and it was almost all of it still there. I drew it out and in the summer of 1919 I spent near £80 of it on renovating

THE KIMONO

the Hartmans' shop. Blanche was delighted. She supervised the decorations and the final colour scheme of the combined shop and café was orange and green.

'Like your kimono,' I said. 'You remember it? That old one?'

'Oh! Arthur. I've still got it.'

'Put it on,' I said.

She went upstairs and put it on. In about a minute I followed her. It was like old times. It brought us together again.

'Tell me something,' I said. 'That first day, when I came in. You hadn't anything on underneath, had you?'

'No,' she said. 'I'd just had a bath and it was all I had time to slip on.'

'By God, kiss me.'

She kissed me and I held her very tight. Her body was thicker and heavier now, but she was still lovely. It was all I asked. I was quite happy.

Then something else happened. I got used to seeing men in the shop. Most of them shot off now when they saw me, but one day when I came back from the bank there was a man in the living-room.

He was an oldish chap, with pepper and salt hair cut rather short.

'Hello,' I said, 'what's eating you?' I got to be rather short with any man I saw hanging about the place.

'Nothing's eating me,' he said. 'It's me who wants something to eat.'

'Oh! Who are you?'

'My name's Hartman,' he said.

I looked straight at his hair. It was Blanche's father. And in a minute I knew that he was out of prison.

I don't know why, but it was more of a shock to me than Blanche's affairs with other men. Blanche and I could fight out the question of unfaithfulness between ourselves, but the question of a criminal in the house was different.

'He isn't a criminal,' Blanche said. 'He's easily led and he was led away by others. Be kind to him, honey.'

THE KIMONO

Perhaps I was soft. Perhaps I had no right to do anything. It was not my house, it was not my father. Blanche was not even my wife. What could I possibly do but let him stay?

That summer we did quite well with the new café. We made a profit of nine and very often ten or eleven pounds a week. Hartman came home in May. In July things began to get worse. Actually, with the summer at its height, they ought to have been better. But the takings dropped to six and even five pounds. Blanche and her mother kept saying that they couldn't understand it.

But I could. Or at least I could after a long time. It was Hartman. He was not only sponging on me, but robbing the till too. All the hard-earned savings of the shop were being boozed away by Hartman.

I wanted to throw him out. But Blanche and her mother wouldn't hear of it. 'He's nothing but a damned scoundrel,' I shouted.

'He's my father,' Blanche said.

That was the beginning of it. I date the antagonism between us and also the estrangement between us from that moment. It was never the same afterwards. I could stand Blanche being nothing more or less than a whore, but it was the thought of the old man and the thought of my own stupidity and folly that enraged me and finally almost broke me up.

Perhaps I shouldn't have written the word whore, and I wouldn't have done if it wasn't for the fact that, as I sit here, my heart is really almost broken.

v

I am sitting in what used to be my bedroom. We have changed it into a sitting-room now. We ought to have it done up. We haven't had new paper on it for seven or eight years.

I am just fifty. I think Blanche is just about fifty, too. She is out somewhere. It's no use thinking where. Passion is still as essential to her as bread. It means no more to her and I

THE KIMONO

have long since given up asking where she goes. And somehow — and this is the damnable part of it all — I am still very fond of her, but gently and rather foolishly now. What I feel for her most is regret. Not anger and not passion. I couldn't keep up with her pace. She long since out-distanced me in the matter of emotions.

Mrs. Hartman is dead. I am sorry. She was likeable and though sometimes I didn't trust her I think she liked me. Hartman still hangs on. I keep the till-money locked up, but somehow he picks the locks, and there it is. He's too clever for me and I can't prove it. I feel as if, now, I am in a prison far more complete than any Hartman was ever in. It is a bondage directly inherited from that first catastrophic passion for Blanche. It's that, really, that I can't escape. It binds me irrevocably, I know that I shall never escape.

Last night, for instance, I had a chance to escape. I know of course that I'm a free man and that I am not married to Blanche and that I could walk out now and never come back. But this was different.

Hilda asked for me. I was in the shop, alone, just about six o'clock. I was looking at the paper. We don't get many people in the café now, but I always have the evening paper, in case. This district has gone down a lot and the café of course has gone down with it. We don't get the people in that we did. And as I was reading the paper the wireless was on. At six o'clock the dance band ended, and in another moment or two someone was saying my name.

'Will Arthur Lawson, last heard of in London twenty-five years ago, go at once to the Nottingham Infirmary, where his wife, Hilda Lawson, is dangerously ill.'

That was all. No one but me, in this house I mean, heard it. Afterwards no one mentioned it. Round here they think my name is Hartman. It was as though it had never happened.

But it was for me all right. When I heard it I stood dumb, as though something had struck me down. I almost died where I stood, at the foot of the stairs.

Then after a bit I got over it enough to walk upstairs to the sitting-room. I did not know quite what I was doing.

THE KIMONO

I felt faint and I sat down. I thought it over. After a minute I could see that there was no question of going. If it had been Blanche — yes. But not Hilda. I could not face it. And I just sat there and thought not of what I should do but what I might have done.

I thought of that hot day in 1911, and the Kersch job and how glad I was to get it. I thought about Hilda. I wondered what she looked like now and what she had done with herself for twenty-five years and what she had suffered. Finally I thought of that catastrophic ecstasy with Blanche, and then of the kimono. And I wondered how things might have gone if the Hartmans' ice-cream freezer had never broken and if Blanche had been dressed as any other girl would have been dressed that day.

And thinking and wondering, I sat there and cried like a child.

THE LANDLADY

CORA INGRAM took in lodgers, when there were lodgers to take. Her husband played the cornet, which did not help much. Six weeks, no work.

It was summer. No work, no lodgers. No money, no fun. Cora listened all day for the front door. She knew the raps as a commissionaire knows faces. Insurance-man, sharp and bony. How long could they go on paying? Milkman, knock and open. Drink more milk? Baker, solid and respectful, a nice boy. Trade club, noon Saturdays, just as they were sitting down to dinner, comic, saucy. Rum-tiddley butter-scotch, brown-bread. Walk straight in. How long could they keep it up?

Cora was big, smart: too smart for the street. At forty, she still fancied herself. The street was an arid gully of houses all alike: two long window-pocked walls facing each other, white lips of doorsteps shining, grey lace curtains, grey blistered paintwork, once white. Cora by contrast was like some heavy flower, sulky, full-blown. She had fair thick hair which hung down in one brassy pigtail in the mornings. Her eyes were very small, little dark bone-mutton eyes that she kept buttoned up, as though trying to disguise her emotions. She smiled much, fetching, a little false, her heavy lips easily shining. She blossomed fleshly at the doorway to answer knocks.

The card in the window was beginning to fade in the sun: the board to yellow, the lettering to grey. Lodgers. Some hopes. In a street like this? Tired of it, she blamed Ingram. Ingram was tired too, but differently, and had no answer. He had worked a consol in a boot factory. The consol is a demon, a killer. At forty-five Ingram was worn out. With his fleshless face and peppery hair and a tired sprout of a moustache, he was tired, body and soul. He played, in the evenings, tired notes on his cornet. 'You and that damned cornet!' Cora would shout. 'Shut it! Shut it for God's sake afore I bust it. What good does that do?'

THE LANDLADY

Then something happened. A knock. From the kitchen Cora could detect its difference. It had discretion in it, manners. None of the boniness of the insurance, the sauce of the trade club. Apron off, she blossomed at the doorway.

‘Could I see the lady who lets rooms?’

A young man, about thirty, black hair, and with him a girl, about ten or eleven.

‘I’m the lady,’ Cora said.

‘I’m looking for rooms,’ the man said.

‘You’re looking for rooms. Just for yourself?’

‘No, for the little girl, too.’

‘Oh! For the little girl.’ Expressionless, in polite negation, but thinking and meaning: ‘Oh? That’s different.’

The girl stood with still eyes, taking it in. She was dark, a little delicate. The man carried a suit-case. He was delicate himself, but the pale skin had fire under it. He had a way of looking sharply, magnetically about him.

‘If you’ve got rooms perhaps we could look at them,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Cora said. She was hesitating. ‘I don’t know about the girl. I’ve never taken children.’

‘She’s a good girl,’ the man said. ‘She’ll go to school. She could sleep in my room.’

‘Well, come in. Put your suit-case down in the hall.’

So the man put down his suit-case and Cora said, ‘Come up,’ and they went upstairs, the girl last, to look at the bedroom. The girl took it all in with still eyes, never speaking.

‘This is the room I was thinking of for you,’ Cora said.

The man stared at it; brass bed, marble washstand, grey lino, texts. ‘How much?’ he said.

‘It’s a good room and I could let it any time for thirty shillings.’

‘I can’t do it,’ the man said.

‘That’s with full board.’

‘I couldn’t do it. With the girl on top.’

He stood looking at Cora with his small fascinating eyes dead still, almost supercilious. He looked straight at her, into her small buttoned eyes, in a way that made her feel queer, nettled. He seemed to sting her. The girl stood close

THE LANDLADY

up to him, proud. They were an irritating pair, aloof, just that bit different. They looked like accomplices. Ideas flashed on Cora: crime, *News of the World*, kidnapping, missing from home, abduction. And with them emotions: fear, excitement, affront. Classy folk. She looked at his hands. That was it, classy folks. The hands were white, seemed cut out of paper.

'Well?' she said. Then suddenly she realized how much she wanted a let. No money, no fun. No work, nothing. Ingram, that damned cornet. Well,' she said, 'how long will you be here? I could make it less for a long let.'

'How much less?'

Same supercilious tone, classy, as though she were muck. It nettled her.

'I dunno. It depends.' She was rattled. 'Well, I'd make it thirty-five shillings for you and the child.'

He smiled, not casually, or in acquiescence or triumph, but personally, straight at her, eye to eye. She saw, suddenly, a glint of wickedness in him, not *News of the World* wickedness, crime, kidnapping, but something sporty, devilish. She saw the classiness as skin deep, like a shop-walker's. She saw him human at last. His eyes held her briefly and fiercely. The dago. She had it now: he was the dago, the film-star sort, with his black sleek hair and side-lines and paper-white hands. And slowly, in reflection, she smirked back.

'That's all right?' she said.

'All right.'

He set down the suit-case. It was noon. Cora thought of dinner.

'I expect you'll eat with us,' she said. 'I couldn't let you have a separate sitting-room at that price.'

'That's all right. I'll be out all day. Ina'll help with odd jobs when she comes home from school. Yes, we'll eat with you, Mrs. ——?'

'Ingram,' she said.

'My name's Weston,' he said.

Cora went out and stood on the landing. She remembered dinner. Friday.

THE LANDLADY

'I thought of fish-and-chips for today,' she said. 'They fry Friday dinner. Do you mind that?'

He looked at her with the dago-look, flashy, still faintly supercilious, nettling and attracting her at the same time.

'I don't mind anything,' he said.

He smiled. Cora went downstairs. All the time the child had not spoken.

II

'Widower, Mr. Weston?'

How many times had she tried to get that out of him? Wasn't it a fair question? Three weeks and she didn't know a damn thing about him. What did he travel in? Every morning out with that aluminium suit-case, all day, catching buses, tramping from door to door, selling something. Selling what? Three weeks and she didn't even know what he travelled in.

She had tried, more than once, to get a look inside that suit-case. Fancy, aluminium. He kept it in the room. She tried it one Sunday. It was locked. She dropped hints, gave him cues. 'That suit-case of yours is heavy, I know, Mr. Weston. Might be full of bombs.' But it was no good. Always the same, no answer, no giving anything away.

'Widower, Mr. Weston?' Always the same. He regarded her with simple inscrutability, with bare superciliousness, offering nothing except that occasional dago smile, one-sided, with the small magnetic eyes fixing her wickedly. She couldn't make him out, couldn't fathom him. A mystery. He had her beat.

Otherwise, no complaints. He paid up, Fridays, regular as clockwork. He ate anything. Never dainty. He was clean: clean to a point of faddiness. His black pin stripe trousers brushed every night, pressed every week. She had felt of the cloth of them: good stuff, thin now, but good stuff, classy. Had he come down in the world? She liked to think it: romance, mystery, woman's cruelty, trying to forget. Tramp-

THE LANDLADY

ing the country with the child, Sunday newspaper drama. But it was no use. She could not bottom him. And she was angered and fascinated, alternately. She wanted to be on terms with him, equal.

'If you ask me,' Ingram said, 'he's all show and nothing else.'

'Nobody asked you!'

'All right, all right. I only —'

'He does *work*, any rate! Shut up!'

Well, it was the first time she'd said that; but it was no use. She was nettled. She liked things straight. 'Widower, Mr. Weston?' Wasn't that straight? It wasn't a crime if your wife had died, was it? It was no use; it beat her.

Then the child. There was something funny about the child, something dark, stand-offish, classy. Ina: classy name, too classy. Cora didn't like it. The child had such set lips, set as though in excessive pride or wooden determination or arrogance or secrecy. Yet her eyes were fluid, soft, beautifully child-like, and would be set in long reflective stillnesses, day-dreaming. Cora didn't like that either. Give me a child who acts sharp, so you can tell what is in their minds.

At twelve, every day, the girl came home from school, hatless, black hair peacock-shining in the sun, to lay the table for half-past twelve dinner. She laid the knives and forks in silence. She moved silently with her rubber gym shoes on the lino, dainty as a cat.

Suddenly Cora saw in her a medium. There were days when Weston did not come back at dinner-time. Working on the far side of the town or in some other town, he took sandwiches, returning to eat hotted-up dinner at night. At times Ingram was away, looking for jobs, fed up, mooching about, bread and cheese in pocket. So there were days when Cora and the girl sat down to dinner alone, in a silence that for Cora was like the infuriating shrillness of a note out of pitch. Potatoes? Gravy? Words of necessity hit the note and killed it momentarily, but there was no conversation and no harmony.

Then Cora tried a different tack: she gave sweetness a

THE LANDLADY

trial. It was drawn-lipped sweetness, forced, a pointed too-niceness. 'You tell me, dear, if you've got any trouble. I know what it is, your age. You tell me, when the time comes.' She made false shots, in the dark. 'I know how it is. I know about your mother. Do you miss her?'

No answer. No answer! Only that damned brazen dreamy stare. Only that silent haughtiness, making her look a fool. She looked at the child with fury. So silent, so abnormally aloof, she maddened Cora past all bearing.

'Don't you know better than that? Not to speak when you're spoken to? Eh? Don't you know better than that, my lady?'

'Yes.'

Ah. Something at last. An answer. Very nice. I'm sure. Nice manners. That's classy folks for you.

'Little girls round here answer nicely. They speak when they're spoke to, chance what they do where you come from. Understand that?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, act as if you did. Who else is to correct you when your father isn't here if I don't?'

No answer, only the grim little lips, haughty, tightly shut.

'Where were you brought up?'

'I can't remember.'

Ah! Can't remember. The haughty, stuck up puss. Can't or don't want to? The saucy cat.

'You know what God does to little girls what tell lies?'

The small black eyes were dreamy, swimming in fear. Cora leaned across the untidy dinner-table, big soap-white arms locked over the vinegar-stained, gravy-sprinkled cloth. The girl was mute with unexpressed and inexpressible little terrors.

'Ah, so you don't know what He does, eh? You don't know? Well, I know. I know, my lady. I know. I was brought up to know. What does your father carry in that case?'

'Samples.'

THE LANDLADY

That was quick enough. Too quick. Answer you back before you could wink.

'What samples?'

'I don't know.'

'And how long's he been carrying it? Doing this work?'

'A long time.'

'How long?'

'Ever since we were in Liverpool.'

'Liverpool. Liverpool, eh? Nice place.' She'd read about it. You couldn't open the *News of the World* without reading about it. So it was Liverpool. Well, perhaps not so classy after all.

'I want to know what he carries in that case.' Then, sweet suddenly, Cora smiled, cajoling, her mouth blossoming in the old easy way. 'It isn't my curiosity. I want to know. Because of the insurance. You see, if he carried something that easily caught fire, the insurance company would chelp. Supposing it was celluloid or something? I don't suppose it is celluloid?'

'I don't know. I —'

The damned brazen, stubborn puss! Wouldn't tell you nothing! You couldn't get to know nothing! Here in the house a month and she was no nearer than when she started.

She got up from the table in anger. She tossed her hair: a gesture of pride, smartness, almost a threat.

The girl sat mute. The threat became an actuality, fierce, delivered with upraised voice.

'I learn you, my girl! I learn you! By God if you were mine I'd limn the skin off your back. I'd learn you damn well whether to answer or not.'

She clattered knives and forks together on plates: an enraged clash of steel and platter that was like the echo of her maddened voice. She flounced out, plates in hand, into the little whitewashed kitchen. She stood trembling. She went outside, into the backyard. It was a mid July day of still, brazen sunlight. Buzzers were blowing and moaning for the afternoon shift, men diving past down the backyards. In the sooty little garden marigolds blazed starrily, butter-

THE LANDLADY

coloured, deep-gold, hot. She stood a moment to look at them, the cinder-path hot under her feet. She stood almost in a trance, trying to calm herself.

When at last she walked back into the house the girl had gone to school. Cora felt queer. What was it? She cleared the table, washed up, stared at the soft soda-diamonds dissolving in the water. What was it? Something got her goat: something about the girl, about Weston.

And then she had it, vaguely at first, intuitively, not certain. Something about him got her down: the way he looked at her, black-eyed, the dago, supercilious. He had her fascinated, like a cat. She had the thought of him playing about at the back of her mind all day, elusively.

Then, next day, she was at the girl again. They were at dinner, alone again. It was suet day, Thursday: lumps of boiled suet drowned in grey gravy, onion-faint, Cora's speciality, given to lodgers, take it or leave it, every Thursday, for years. The day was burning, the slate roofs like hot glass, and the girl looked at the suet, tried it softly, sickly, with barely opened lips, like some little black kitten, and then couldn't face it.

'Well, my lady? What's wrong with it?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Been to school, nothing to eat since seven, and you're not hungry. You mean you don't want it?'

'No.'

'I tell you yes! You're too dainty, very dainty, my lady. Too dainty. That's what. Too damn dainty. It ain't good enough for you, is it? You had better food than that where you was brought up perhaps?'

'No.'

'Then where were you dragged up? No manners, won't eat the food decent people eat. Stuck up, my God!'

The girl began to get up from the table, fear in her face.

'Where are you going?'

'Nowhere, I —'

'Then damn well sit down!'

The girl half-stood, paralysed. Cora rammed food into her

THE LANDLADY

mouth, wet suet, almost cold, the greasy stew slobbering down her chin. She rammed it in fast, in a sort of angry pantomime, as though to show the girl, as an example.

Show her! She wants showing! By God I'd show her something, manners, chelp, ignorance. Stare at you as haughty as haughty. Look right through you, get you down. Like her father. Dark, close. Too close. There was something in these people that defeated her.

'Didn't I tell you to sit down?' she shouted. 'Then sit down! Whose house are you in? You ignorant little bitch!'

Suddenly she leaned across the table and hit the girl, openhanded, across the face. The child reeled, went white, stood still finally in a terror of paralysis. She saw nothing, did not understand. Her head sang with pain, she could not speak. She made motions of feeble humility with her hands, small motions of defeat and fear.

'Now we'll see if that'll learn you! See if that'll learn you any different.' Cora shouted with excessive elation, with triumph she did not feel. 'And if that don't learn you we'll see what will. We'll see what will!'

III

A week later Ingram got a job, in the next town, five miles off, so that he was off by cycle before seven every morning and not back before six at night. The hot days took it out of him, leaving him limp, more tired than ever, lacking energy even for the cornet.

Weston left later, was home earlier. The heat did not seem to touch him. He came in with the same saucy supercilious look in the evenings as he left with in the mornings, always smart, always the shining-haired dago.

Then things got slack: holidays, people not at home, other things on their minds. He began to come home for tea, at four, to lie on the sofa and smoke aloof cigarettes, with that half haughty, half likeable air that had Cora mystified and beaten. And he would lie there and look at her, brazenly,

THE LANDLADY

with black winey eyes and a sort of sleepy fascination, while she laid tea. Until, sometimes, he had her in torture. He seemed to know, also, that he had her in torment, and he kept it up, cat with mouse, for the sheer luxury of it, smiling to himself, tasting the devilry of it.

All that time Cora hated the girl. Dinner was a daily bout of silence, antagonism; Cora, driven wild by the child's mystery and inscrutability, by something she could not name or get hold of, by some thing unchildlike, uncanny. They kept it up darkly, bitterly, for weeks, until the child's soul was tied up inextricably, in knots of terror and pain, until Cora's only release from anger was to hit her again.

'And one of these fine days I'll shut you up until you *do* know better. I don't care who you are or what you are. I'll learn you, begod!'

And still she was no nearer about anything: who they were, what Weston sold, where they had come from. 'Widower, Mr. Weston?' Unanswered, she had given up that question at last. She hated it. She always had known about her lodgers. She hated not knowing. And so she spilled her revenge on the girl, in hot bursts of fluid anger, hitting her, threatening, angered most because there was no protest, so that she had to imagine protests and whip up her impotent rage against something the child had not done or said but which only she herself had imagined.

Then Weston came home very early one day, mid-afternoon. She was washing herself in the kitchen, blouse off, thin shoulder-straps loose. Weston came in with the old superciliousness and looked at her. He looked at her shoulders. They were handsome, heavy shoulders, the flesh pure white. Her chest flowered into heavy breasts. Her arms were powerful and fine. He looked at them openly.

'Oh, sorry,' he said. 'Sorry.'

'You're home early,' ~~she~~ ^{he} said.

'Nothing doing. I think I'll go up and lie on the bed.'

'Shall I bring you a cup of tea?' she said.

'Just as you like,' he said. He smiled in his slow, winey-eyed fashion. 'Just as you like.'

THE LANDLADY

She took up the tea in about twenty minutes. She knocked on the bedroom door. She was quivering. The tea squabbed over. 'Come in,' he said. He was lying on the bed, hands clasped behind his neck. She stood at the lower bedrail, leaning against it. He looked at her for about a minute, the smile on his face. Slowly she smiled back.

'Well,' he said, 'how can I drink it if you hold it over there?'

She took the tea to the bed-side.

'Put it on the table,' he said.

She set the cup and saucer on the table. Suddenly he pulled her down, across the bed, hands spanning her breasts, his mouth against her neck. She turned, struggled a bit, and then lay down beside him. He kissed her and began to take her almost immediately; and she knew, suddenly, that there were a lot of things she no longer cared about, which no longer mattered: Weston and the girl, who they were, where they had come from, what he sold. Lying there, with him, in the small hot bedroom, in the summer afternoon stillness, she knew she had what she wanted. She had all the solutions at last.

It was past four when she went downstairs again. She felt elated, clarified, a new woman. The necessity for knowing things, the anger at not knowing things, had both been destroyed. It was all right at last. No more trouble, no more anger. It was all right at last.

As she came into the kitchen the girl came in from school. Cora stood smiling. The girl did not come in. She stood at the doorway in unbelief, not moving.

'Come in,' Cora said. She was smiling, continually without a break. 'Come on in. Well, why don't you come in?'

The child moved at last and came in. She did not speak. Cora tittered. The girl's face showed no response. It was hard with the crystallization of many emotions: fear, hatred, unbelief and some proud dumb notion of revenge.

BREEZE ANSTEY

THE two girls, Miss Anstey and Miss Harvey, had been well educated; but it was another matter getting a job. They first came together one summer, quite casually, and in the August of the same year, having no prospects, began farming together. In this they felt shrewd; their farm was to be so different. Not a common farm, with pigs or corn, sheep or poultry, but a farm for herbs. 'Where you will find,' they said, 'a thousand people farming the ordinary things, you won't find one farming herbs.' There was something in this. But in their hearts they liked it because they felt it to be different, a little poetical, charged with some unspecified but respectable romance. They had ideals. And that autumn, when they rented a small cottage in Hampshire, with an acre of land, on the edge of the forest, they felt existence for the first time very keenly; they felt independent; they had only to stretch out and pick up handfuls of sweetness and solitude.

The forest opened into a clearing where their house stood, and oak and rhododendron and holly pressed in and down on them and their land, securing their world. The plot was already cultivated, and they intended to grow the herbs, at first, in small lots, taking variety to be salvation. For the first year they would work hard, cultivating; after that they would advertise; after that sell. They divided responsibility. Miss Harvey, the practical one, took charge of the secretarial work and kept accounts and made plans. Miss Anstey had imagination and knew a little botany; she could talk of carpel and follicle, of glandulosa and hirsutum. In late August, in a world still warm and dark and secure in leaf, the first bundles of herbs began to arrive; and pressing out the small rare sweetnesses and joyfully smelling each other's hands, they felt sure of everything. Above all, they felt very sure of each other.

From the first they were devoted. Miss Anstey was the younger, twenty-three. Miss Harvey was twenty-eight. They called each other Breeze and Lorn. No one seemed clear

BREEZE ANSTEY

about the origins and reasons of Miss Anstey's name, which did not express her small, slimmish, very compact and not at all volatile figure. Her hair was almost white; her nostrils were rather arched; she looked Scandinavian. She had a beautiful way of smiling at nothing, absently. She had another way of smiling at Miss Harvey, chiefly when she was not looking. It was a kind of mouse smile, furtive and timid, not fully expressed. It had in it the beginnings of adoration.

Miss Harvey was heavily built, with thick eyebrows and black short hair. She was very strong and wore no stockings and her legs went red, almost ham-coloured, in the sun. She was attractive in a full-blooded, jolly way. She was like some heavy, friendly mare, with her black mane falling over her face, and her thick strong thighs, and her arched way of walking with her shoulders back. Nothing was too much trouble for her, nothing daunted or depressed her.

The two girls at first worked hard, scorning outside help, happy together. They began with three hundred pounds. Breeze said: 'We should be very strict and apportion everything out and pay weekly.' They did this. Rent would cost them fifty a year, so they opened a new account at the bank, paid in a year's rent and signed a banker's order. That settled, they hoped to live on a hundred a year, the two of them. That left a hundred and fifty for seeds and plants, expenses and saving. 'We should save seventy-five,' Lorn said. All this was theory. In practice it did not turn out so well.

It was a long time, almost a whole winter and a spring, before they noticed it. In autumn they were pre-occupied. The autumn went on, that year, a long time, drawn up into some too-dreamy twilight of mild airs and leaves that hung on and kept out the low sunlight like blankets of dark leaf-wool. August and September were hot. Planted too soon, their first plants died. In a panic they ordered more, then kept the water bucket going. Their well got low. That was a real problem. They could not bathe. Lorn made little portable tents of lath and newspaper to shade the plants, and by September they had learnt to wash hair, face and feet in one kettle of water. Up to that time they had not worn stock-

BREEZE ANSTEY

ings, and often not shoes. They had to give that up. They wore shoes and washed their feet twice a week. That was real hardship.

But they were not troubled about it. They liked it. It was part of the new life, more still of the new independence. It was fun. It was hardship only by comparison. Instinctively they felt that cleanliness and godliness were one, perhaps, after all. They longed for water, not seeing until then how much life might depend on it.

Then Breeze made a discovery. They felt it to be miraculous. Wandering off the forest path to look for sweet chestnuts, she came upon a pond, not a hundred yards from the house. Shaded by trees, it was quite deep. Round it marsh and sedge were dry, the earth cracked in thick crust blisters, and she could see where wild ponies had broken it up, coming down to drink. She fetched Lorn, who said: 'We could fetch twenty buckets in an hour and then bathe.' Breeze got some water in her hands. 'Why carry it?' she said. The water was brownish, leaf-stained, but clear. 'Why take the mountain to Mahomed? We could come down here and bathe.'

'Not in daylight.'

'Why shouldn't we? We would have costumes on. Who's to say anything?'

'Nobody. But this is the forest. You know people are always wandering about.'

'All right. Then we could come when the sun's gone down. It's warm enough.'

It was too good to miss. After sunset they took soap and towels and costumes and went into what was already half darkness under the trees. The pond was black, unreflective, and there was some sense, under the pitch dark roof of forest branches, of peculiar secrecy. As she took off her clothes, Breeze said: 'I'm going in without anything on.' She stood undressing, feet in the water. 'It's warm,' she said. 'It's wonderfully warm. Don't put anything on. It's warm and like silk. It would be wicked to put anything on.'

She went in naked, swam round and looked back to Miss Harvey. She was putting her costume on.

BREEZE ANSTEY

'Oh! Don't!'

'What do you think I am?' Lorn said. 'Venus?'

'Yes, but it's the feeling. It's wonderful. And it's quite warm.'

'Is it swimmable?'

'It's about four feet. Look.'

She swam off, turning, breasting back. When she stood up again she saw Lorn knee-deep in water. She had nothing on. Looking at her the girl was struck by an odd spasm of pleasure. It ran up her legs like a hot current of blood and pounded up, finally, in her chest. She felt, for about a second, strange and weak. There was aroused in her an unconscious exquisite capacity for pain and she did not know what to do with it. It was like a shock.

'I thought you said it was warm?'

'Go under.'

It was all she could say. She did not know why, but the sight of Lorn filled her with a queer excitement. Lorn was bigger than she had imagined, more mature, more ripe. She felt absurdly young beside her. She looked at her large brown nipples and saw in them the potential beauty of motherhood. The thick smooth flesh of the whole body had some beautiful power to attract and comfort. Lorn went under, up to her neck. She came up heavily, dripping, to stand in water up to her knees. The girl looked at her again, in a spell of adoration.

'It's muddy!' Lorn said.

'No. Not here. Come over here. It's lovely. Like sand. Why don't you swim?'

'I'll walk. I'm not certain of it.'

She took heavy water-bound strides across the pond, arms folded under breasts.

'Shall we wash each other?' Breeze said.

'Puzzle, find the soap.'

'I brought it.'

'Good. Wash me. Wash my sins away. Wash my back.'

The younger girl stood with her habitual absent smile of

BREEZE ANSTEY

adoration, rubbing the soap in her hands. 'Swim round while I get some lather.'

Lorn swam, heavy and white, in a ponderous circle, then came back to Breeze. The water was up to their middles. The young girl's hands were white with the lather. Lorn bent her back. She put her hands on her knees and the girl began to soap her back, absently tender.

'Oh! that's lovely. Lovely. Wash up as far as possible and down as far as possible. Why is it so nice to have your back rubbed?'

'I don't know, why is it? Have the soap and rub your front.'

Lorn made lather and rubbed it over her chest, until her breasts were snow bubbles with the brown mouth of nipple alone uncovered. Then she turned, and Breeze stared at her.

'What are you looking at?'

'You're so big. I didn't think you were so big, Lorn.'

'Well, I like that! Big. You mean fat.'

'No. Lorn, I like it. You look like a woman. Not half of one. Look at me. You could hold what there is of me in one hand.'

She looked down at her small, almost stiff breasts, her slight figure.

'I ought to wear more support,' Lorn said. 'I shall be all over the place. Look at you. You're the ideal of every female in Christendom. All you need wear is half a yard of silk. Turn round and let me scrub you, child.'

Breeze turned, bent her back and Lorn rubbed her with large soap-soft hands. The sensation of the soft drawn-down palms was something exquisite, physically thrilling to the girl.

'Harder. I want to get really clean. Harder. Wash me all over. Everywhere.'

'Anything else, Madam?'

'Your hands are bigger than mine. Soap me all over.'

'Extra charge.' They both laughed. 'Front portion extra. Owing to my sensibility, Madam.'

'Oh! Lorn, you're a dear. It's a grand feeling to be washed again.'

She stood with arms over her head, hands clasped on her

BREEZE ANSTEY

hair, and turned round, and Lorn soaped her chest and shoulders. Her hands took wide strong sweeps across and down the girl's body. The soap covered the small almost absurd bust in snow froth. 'Oh! it's grand, Lorn. Lovely!'

'We must get out.'

'Oh! must we? Need we?'

'I can hardly see you. It must be awfully late.'

'It's nice in the twilight. It's warm. That's all that matters. One swim.'

She swam round the darkening pond. Above, when she turned and floated, she could see the autumn evening sky colourless beyond the forest branches. The trees seemed very near, the sky correspondingly far off. She felt extraordinarily happy, her mind quiet, the exquisite sensation of shock gone. She floated serenely on the memory of emotions. She could smell the forest, dampish, closed-in, the sweetish odour of living and falling leaves, and she felt almost like crying.

Then she stood in shallow water and, looking up, saw that Lorn was out. She saw the white flap of the towel. Something made her hurry out too, some sudden and not quite conscious impulse to be near her.

She ran out, splashing. She stood quivering on the cracked mud among the sedge, and got her towel. She looked at Lorn and in a moment the sensation of physical shock, like some electric start of nerves, struck her again. She rubbed her body hard, trembling.

'I feel wonderful,' Lorn said.

Lorn put her skirt over her head. It was pink, almost colourless in the tree twilight. Breeze did not speak. She felt nearer to Lorn, at that moment, than she had ever done to anyone in her life. It was an attachment not only of emotion, but of body. She felt drawn to Lorn physically, in a beautiful way, by some idealized force of attraction. It elated her and, for a second or two, stupefied her with its strength and gentleness.

It was only when Lorn said at last, 'Come on, Breezy, cover your shame, child, do, and get a stitch or two on,' that she came back to her normal self. Even then she did not

BREEZE ANSTEY

she wanted to speak and she stood trying to speak, to frame some words to express at least a hint of her affection, but nothing came.

In five minutes she was dressed. The forest was then almost dark, and looking up at the fragments of sky above the heavy mass of trees she felt some kind of balm in them. She felt completely herself, at rest again.

II

‘Lorn,’ Breeze said, ‘you must have been in love, sometime?’

It was early January, and now they had nothing to do, on the long winter nights, except read and talk and evolve unrealized theories about the future, the farm, the world, themselves and men. They argued hard, quarrelled a little; but the central core of affection between them was never soured or shaken. It was dark south-west weather, wild warm days of rain followed by black nights, when they could do very little outside. They settled down after tea and read books, had supper at eight and generally talked till ten. ‘The less we go out, the less we spend,’ they said.

‘Yes,’ Lorn said.

‘But when was it? You never told me. You never said anything.’

‘I should have told you if I’d ever told anybody.’

‘Did it go on long?’

‘Two years. If you can call that long.’

‘Did you — did it ever come to anything?’

‘Yes.’

Breeze had wanted to know this. She felt somehow that it concerned her, was important. She had felt, sometimes, that it might distress her. Now she felt almost indifferent, only curious. As something in the past, it hardly touched her.

‘Only once?’

‘No. A lot. Almost every time we saw each other. Almost whenever we could.’

‘It must be a long time ago, or you couldn’t talk about it.’

BREEZE ANSTEY

'Three or four years. Four years.'

'Who wanted it most? Did he, or you?'

'Both of us. We both did. We couldn't go on without it. It wouldn't have meant anything.'

Breeze did not speak. She wanted to ask something else. Lorn said:

'Why this sudden discussion of my affairs, young lady?'

'We swore we'd have no secrets.'

'Well, I've told you now.'

'Lorn,' Breeze said, 'what's it like? The loving part. The proper loving.'

'Sometimes there's nothing there.'

'And others?'

'You must know. I can't explain. It's something you can't tell.'

'Like some electric shock?'

'No.'

'What then?'

'Partly electric. But more a fulfilment. You take something from each other, and something in you is fulfilled.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'I know. It's a thing that doesn't make sense. Why should it?'

Breeze said earnestly: 'Does it change you?'

'Yes.'

'How? Physically?'

'Partly. It must do. But I don't think you'd notice it anyway, whatever it does.'

'Not till afterwards?'

'No.' Lorn got up. 'I don't think you do till afterwards. Till you must do without it.'

She went into the kitchen, gathered plates and knives and forks from the dresser, and came back to lay supper. Breeze looked at her with an absent smile, and said:

'Why is it all over?'

Lorn flaked the cloth, smoothed it, her eyes looking down flat on its dead whiteness.

'I never said it was all over.'

BREEZE ANSTEY

Breeze could not speak. She felt it instantly, for some reason, to be something between them. She felt the minute beginnings of a queer jealousy. It was not active; it moved in her consciousness like a remote pain, pricking her.

When it faded, in a moment, and she was able to speak, she said: 'I don't see what you mean. How do you mean, it's not all over?'

'Oh! Just that. We had a pact and parted, but very shortly he'll be home again, and then —'

'Home?'

'He's in India.'

'India? A soldier?'

'An army doctor.'

'Let me make the cocoa,' Breeze said.

She bent down before the fire, pushed the kettle against the logs. The kettle sang a little. She straightened up, mixed cocoa and milk in the two cups, on the table, while Lorn cut bread. Breeze felt strangely anxious, as though Lorn had told her she was ill or was going away. Remote, not fully conscious, her anxiety pricked her, as the jealousy had done, like a small pain. The kettle boiled and she made cocoa, half looking at Lorn. How very strong Lorn was: big wind-cut arms, solid neck, such friendly strength, so warm. She stood absently fascinated, the small pain dying away.

'It was a question of finishing his period of service,' Lorn said. 'He wanted to go back.'

'He wanted to go back more than he wanted you.'

'No. He wanted to go back. I understood that all right. I wanted him to go back. I was only twenty-three, just out of college.'

'What difference did that make? If it was all you say it was?'

'That was just it. We wanted to see if it made a difference. If it made a difference, well, there it was. If it didn't, then he could come back, and we'd get married.'

They sat by the fire, with cocoa and bread and cheese, Lorn with her skirts up, warming her knees.

'I think that's awful,' Breeze said. 'For all it mattered, you were married. Nothing could alter that.'

BREEZE ANSTEY

'I don't see it. We'd made love. But that was something we couldn't help. We could help marriage, if we ever got to it. Hence the arrangement.'

'It was like making a business of it,' Breeze said. She was upset, trembling. 'It's a hateful thing. It was like making a business of it, it was like making a business of it! It was awful!'

'Breeze, Breeze.'

'You don't deny it, do you?'

'Breeze.'

'Who proposed it, he or you?'

'He did. He was older.'

'Then he wasn't worthy of you! How could he be? Proposing that. Proposing an awful thing like that. He wasn't worthy of you!'

'Breeze. I can't bear to hear it.'

The words were too much for the girl. She began to cry, deeply, with shame and some unhappiness she could not define. She set her cocoa on the hearth, could not see for tears, and spilt it. Lorn put her cup down beside it and put her arms round Breeze's neck. 'You're not to cry. Why are you crying? Breeze. It's silly to cry.' She held her, strongly, against the warm resilient bulk of her large body. They sat like mother and child, bound by grief and comfort. 'You hear me? You're not to cry.'

'It does me good,' Breeze said. 'I shall feel better. Hold me. I shall feel better.'

'I'm holding you,' Lorn said. 'I've got you.'

'Hold me tighter.'

III

By April things had begun to move. The rows of herbs began to look vigorous and full of promise. Turned over and hoed, the earth was sweet and black. The two girls planted fresh supplies of plants, new varieties, and sowed seeds. They got up early and worked on into the bright

BREEZE ANSTEY

spring evenings, and in the evenings, after a warm day, they could smell the forest, the strong, vigorous and yet almost drowsy odour of a great mass of trees, breaking into leaf. They were enchanted by the new life, by an existence in which, as never before, they felt they had a purpose. They lived physically. Tired out, earth-stained, they came indoors as darkness came on and sat down in the little kitchen-sitting-room in the cottage and sat on without speaking and watched the fading out of the primrosy twilights, their minds dumbly content. Too tired to talk, they ate supper, went to bed early and were up again at six.

They spent energy needlessly. Lorn did the digging: she had a large four-pronged fork and used it bravely, like a weapon, knocking the soil about, throwing out every stone. She had some strenuous ambition to see the land as smooth as sand, without stones, immaculate. She did a man's work, and her body got to have some kind of male awkwardness about it: a longer stride, cruder grasp, a way of straddling as she stood. Close to her every day, Breeze did not notice it. She did the hoeing, generally, and the labelling and sowing, and the little artistic things: she would have a little rock-garden by the back door, on the south side, with patches of purple horned viola and winey primulas and rock rose, and then lavender hedges down the paths, giving vistas. 'You and your vistas,' Lorn said. But vistas were important; they had the effect of making things seem, to Breeze, not quite as they were, and the illusion was precious. She felt the beauty of things keenly; she could not bear ugliness, and spring drove her into small inexpressible ecstasies. Beauty was everything. It impinged upon her sharply, with pain, so that she felt something immensely precious and personal about the spring. It was for her and she could not share it. Unlike Lorn, she worked in a kind of semi-consciousness, not bravely, but with a kind of absent persistence. She spent greater energy of spirit, dreaming as she worked, and it seemed as if the spring days sucked her up, body and spirit and all, leaving her at times almost crying with weariness. She did not understand this supreme tiredness at all. She worked harder to overcome

BREEZE ANSTEY

it, splashing her hoe crudely with clenched hands, forcing herself into the full consciousness of the act, breaking down her dreamy passivity. All the time, and all through spring and summer, it seemed to get worse. The great massed ring of forest seemed to shut out life sometimes, so that she felt imprisoned by a wall of wood and leaf, sucked by a beauty that was almost parasitic into an awful listlessness of spirit that she could not understand. All the time, in contrast to Lorn, she seemed to get more and not less feminine: much slighter, very brown and delicate, with a light detached beauty and an almost irritating remoteness of spirit. It was as though she needed waking up; as though the best of her were not alive.

Then Lorn noticed it. By the end of May the oaks were in full flower and the forest stood like an olive cloud. The great polished bushes of rhododendron split pinkly into blossom, and the rare sweet-scented wild azaleas, pale yellow. The forest breathed out its enormous but not quite tangible sweetness and sucked back, in turn, the still more enormous breath of the life about it. There were days when, under the shelter of the too-close trees, life was utterly stupefied.

'I get so tired,' Lorn said. 'How is it? Do you get tired?'

'Yes. I didn't want to say anything about it. I thought it was just myself.'

'But how is it? What's the reason for it?'

'I feel there's no air.'

'Possibly we need a change,' Lorn said. 'We might have been working too hard.'

'But it's not the work. I'm tired if I sit still.'

'Even so, a change would do us no harm.'

So they went for three days to London. For economy they stayed at a little scrubby hotel off Guildford Street. They ate cheaply; saw films cheaply. London tired them, but in a new way; it stripped off the old lassitude like a heavy skin. They had a double room with one bed, and they stayed in bed, every morning, as late as they dare. And at night, when Lorn took the younger girl in her arms and mothered her down to sleep, Breeze felt a tender and inexplicable restful transfusion of strength take place. She lay close to

BREEZE ANSTEY

Lorn and felt again, still not with full consciousness, that queer stirring of remote affection that was like a small pain. It was beautiful, but it was also reassuring, a very wonderful comfort, a strength against trouble. One night Breeze woke up with a start, frightened, not knowing where she was, feeling alone in a strange place. She started wildly up in bed, and said: 'What is it?' I don't want it! I don't want it to come, please! I don't want it,' but in a moment Lorn stretched out her arms and took her back, saying, 'Silly kid, silly kid,' in a voice of strong but amused tenderness.

'What made you wake up in the night?' she said next morning.

'I was in trouble,' Breeze said. 'It was you I wanted. I was all right when I'd got you.'

That afternoon they went to see a woman, the secretary of an organization specializing in the distribution of rural products. Lorn had heard of her and had written, asking for an interview. This woman made them see various new aspects of things. She raised hopes. Where they had seen, vaguely, that some day they must organize distribution in order to keep going, they now began to see, rationally, how such organization must be planned, how far ahead it must be planned, how little they had done. They would need, in time, packers, a mail-order system, expert knowledge on this, that and the other. Miss Wills, the secretary, wore light amber rimmed spectacles and spoke in a voice of vinegar and treacle which both Breeze and Lorn disliked. But they felt, beyond the voice and the spectacles, a shrewd, clever, no-nonsense personality. 'You're on a good thing, you girls, if you'll work hard, and come to me whenever you're stuck. But don't try to be elegant. You're amateurs and you can't afford to be amateurs. We're in touch with all kinds of markets here and we can take all your stuff, if it's good, on a commission basis. You've got to look at things rationally, Miss Harvey, without a lot of sticky romance. When shall you be ready for production?'

Lorn told her. 'We hope to be in a position to do something next year. That's what we thought.'

BREEZE ANSTEY

'All right. Up to date, what have you done? I mean regarding organization?'

'Not much.'

'Then you must start. I think it might be as well if I came down to see you. Discuss things. I could come' — she looked up a diary, marked it off in blue pencil — 'in a fortnight. That is, after Whitsun. I'll stay the week-end of June 5th. Let me know if that suits you. Drop me a card: yes or no. That'll be enough.'

They went away full of hope, excited. They saw the thing in rational outline at last, no longer some cloudy embryo of romance. They saw that they must work hard, plan, think, that it was not enough to waste an energy of body and spirit. They saw that by working in the dark, they had worked for nothing; they had given themselves up, whole-heartedly, to emptiness.

'I think that's what made us so tired,' Lorn said. 'Working and working and not knowing quite where we were going.'

'Oh! let's get home, Lorn. I want to be back doing something. I don't want to be away any longer.'

They went back on the following day, excitement still strong, their whole hopes concentrated on the pole of the ideal pointed out by the secretary. 'I didn't like her,' Breeze said. 'She was too sweet and too sure, but she knew what was what. Oh! Lorn, I'm glad we went. We've *got* something now. We can look forward to something.'

When they arrived back at the cottage, in the late afternoon, they found a slip on the front door-mat: a cable awaited Lorn at the post office. She at once got on her bicycle and rode with excitement into Lyndhurst. She was back in half an hour. By that time Breeze had tea laid. Lorn laid the cable on the table, for Breeze to read. The cable had been handed in at Port Said, two days previously, and it said:

Expect to arrive London Friday telegraph me Grosvenor Hotel when and where possible meet you have plans for future Vernon

'He's coming home,' Lorn said. She stood in silence for a

BREEZE ANSTEY

moment, and then began to cry. Her strength seemed to vanish at once, she stood weak and in some way foolish, womanish, miserable with joy. All the time Breeze stood apart from her, repelled by some unaccountable feeling of dislike, not knowing what to do.

I V

She was caught up, from that moment, by the force of a peculiar jealousy. She got fixed in her mind, as though by some fierce and abrupt photographic flash, a fully realized picture of the man who was coming. He was about thirty, an easy sociable being, with large, cold medical hands, a man of assurance, with the blond aloof sobriety of the English middle class. She saw also, for some reason, his mother in the background. Why, she did not know, but she saw the mother as some skinny and also aloof halo behind the man. She was holding a cablegram too, and smiling, with indulgent proud stretched lips, like some absurd filmic emblem of maternity and sacrifice: the brave waiting for the brave. She felt that she hated her too.

She saw the change in Lorn with identical clarity. Emotion sharpened her before she knew it. With quiet derision she saw Lorn get on her bicycle, the next morning, to bike off to send her wire. She was not prepared for the sudden switch over from adoration to contempt. She had not time to consider it or defend herself from it when it came. It hit her, striking from within, before she had time to think. 'Lorn looks so silly, rushing off. Rushing off like a school-kid.' Lorn, getting on her bicycle in a hurry, had got her skirt bundled beneath her, showing the laddered and worn tops of her working stockings. She looked, for a second, ungainly, heavily ridiculous. The darned stocking and the gap of bare red flesh above them looked ugly. 'Her legs are ugly. Why doesn't she pull her skirts down?' She rode off with excited haste, her thick legs pounding on the bicycle pedals. 'She's got the saddle too low. She hasn't raised it since I used it.

BREEZE ANSTEY

Her knees stick out.' The impressions were instinctive, having no incentive from the conscious self. She could not control them.

Lorn was gone an hour. Breeze worked, meanwhile, on the plot, hoeing among rows of thyme and parsley. It was warm, heavy weather; weeds were coming fast. Breeze kept looking towards the house. She heard at last Lorn's bicycle bell and, looking up, saw Lorn herself pushing the bicycle up the path: pushing heavily, panting, excited, thick legs lumping down on the path, head forward, mouth open. Instinctively the impression leapt to mind: 'She thumps her feet down like a horse. Why doesn't she hold herself straight?' Lorn was untidy, hot from the ride. 'Her face looks awful. Like raw meat. Has she been to Lyndhurst and back like that?' Lorn almost flung the bicycle against the water-butt at the house corner and thumped into the house, catching her foot against the step, stumbling. 'She looks as though she doesn't know what she's doing. She looks stupid. Only half there.'

She went on hoeing. Lorn did not come out of the house. For a time Breeze did not take much notice; then half an hour passed, an hour, and it was almost noon. Breeze began to get more and more impatient, hoeing fiercely, chopping the hoe hard against the soft dry earth, raising dust. What was Lorn doing? Why didn't she come out, just to say Hullo? Hungry, Breeze remembered then that it was Lorn's turn to cook. That explained it. Even so, she felt inexplicably and persistently angry, against her will. She hoed until her shoes and legs were soot-powdered with dust and her body muck-sweaty and her insides weak with hunger.

Then at twelve-thirty she dropped the hoe and went into the house. She registered, at once, a number of unpleasant impressions: no smell of dinner, no table laid, no Lorn, nothing. Wherever was Lorn? She wrenched open the stairs door and shouted her name.

'Lorn! Lorn! For goodness sake!'

And at once Lorn replied, easily, almost sweetly. 'Yes? Want anything?'

BREEZE ANSTEY

In vacant fury, Breeze stood at the foot of the stairs. 'I thought it was your turn to cook? What have you been doing? You've been back from Lyndhurst hours.'

'I know. Come up a second. I want to tell you something.'

Breeze went upstairs, into Lorn's bedroom. Lorn was sitting at her dressing-table in new peach-coloured skirt and knickers, making up. She had a clean huckaback towel over her shoulders and was rubbing a white skin-cream over her face; then, as Breeze came in, she took the towel off her shoulders and wiped her hands and, very carefully, her lips. Bare again, her shoulders looked heavy and coarse, without grace. Breeze stood still, at the door; she could see Lorn's face in the mirror. She did not know what to do or say or what to make of it. Emotion and face-cream had made Lorn's face somehow shining and puffed. It looked faintly gross: not Lorn's face at all, but the face of some absurd obese stranger.

'What's come over you?' Breeze said.

'He's coming down this afternoon,' Lorn said, 'by the four o'clock.'

'How do you know? I thought you telegraphed.'

'I telephoned. I telephoned the hotel instead. I spoke to him.'

'Is that why you were gone so long?'

'Not altogether. I had to get something.' She was unscrewing a cylinder of lipstick. 'She doesn't know how to hold it,' Breeze thought. 'She holds it like a stick of kid's rock. What's come over her?'

Lorn's thick strong fingers grasped the lipstick crudely and she began to rub it clumsily, to and fro, on her lips. 'She uses it like an indiarubber. She's got no idea. She's never done it before.' The lips grew orange, greasy. 'She's got the wrong colour. She's daubing it on. She can't know. She's like a kid.' All of this continual creation of impressions was unconscious, in some way against her will. It ceased when Lorn said:

'Then I had to order the taxi.'

'Taxi?'

BREEZE ANSTEY

'He said order a taxi. It could call for me here, then bring us both back from the station. He said he didn't fancy a tramp with luggage.'

'He's staying?'

'Well, I should think so.' She was pushing out her lips towards the mirror, in an orange pout; she drew them back, pursed them; she twitched the corners, smiling a little. The lips seemed enamelled, brittle, like snakeskin. Satisfied, Lorn set them in what she felt was a line of tenderness, naturally. 'She looks hopeless, awful,' Breeze thought. 'She looks pathetic. She's got pimples on her face. She can't know how awful she looks.' Suddenly she could not bear it. 'Lorn, let me do it,' she said. 'Let me touch it up. You're too heavy.'

She took the lipstick: the tinfoil was warm and sweaty where Lorn had held it in her hot hands, the stick already soft beneath.

'What made you get orange?'

'He likes it.'

'It's not your colour.'

'I know. I wanted cerise. But he likes flame. He always liked it.'

Breeze looked at the stick. Flame-coloured, kiss-proof, it was a symbol of some kind of fatuous hope. She wiped Lorn's lips, until they were clean again except for fissures of orange in the cracks of the skin; then she began all over again, painting them delicately, bringing the mouth into softer, longer line. All the time Lorn was trembling.

V

That afternoon, while Lorn had gone to the station in her taxi, there was a storm. It broke with warm stickiness and a great beat of thick rain that flashed white against the summery dark background of forest. It drove Breeze indoors. She sat miserable, waiting and listening for the taxi beyond the

BREEZE ANSTEY

sound of rain and the huge sudden blunderings of thunder. The air was hot and oppressive and the rain, smashing down grass and plants and flowers, made small floods among the flattened rows of herbs. By mid-afternoon the garden looked a desolation, its grace gone, its colours washed out, the forest beyond it a gloomy wall of solid leaf and rain. Waiting, miserable, she felt it to be almost the worst thing that could have happened. The place looked mean and small and dead.

The taxi came at half-past three. Going to the window to watch, Breeze had in her mind her preconceived picture of the man: blond, aloof, coldly medical, about thirty, with the skinny and aloof halo of his mother shining, inexplicably, in the background. She had waited for his arrival with a kind of remote arrogance, in a determination to be aloof also, her preconceived image part of a preconceived hatred.

Looking across the garden, to the gate, she had a great shock. There appeared with Lorn, under her grey umbrella, a man of more than fifty. She could not believe it. She stood and stared at him in a conflict of pain: the pain of unbelief, amazement and the shock of a momentary and stupid terror. Her image of him went black, like a fused light, the halo of the mother fluttering out behind it like a silly candle.

She had not time to think. In a moment he was standing before her, grey-haired, lean, flesh yellow with sun, with the air of some decaying and dictatorial professor, nose slightly askew, eyes having some curious affliction of twitching, so that she could not look at him.

'So this,' he said, shaking hands with her, 'is Breeze Anstey?'

His voice was nasal, meticulous, a little superior. It was a voice accustomed to speaking obliquely, in innuendoes. She did not trust it. Hearing it, she felt the conception of her hatred of him harden more firmly than ever. At that moment it was the only thing of which she felt quite sure.

Foolishly she said: 'I'm sorry it rained like this — I mean in this tropical way.'

'Tropical. This?' He was very amused. Greatly. Tropical? Very, very funny. Did she understand, dear young lady, quite what tropical meant? He looked at her with

BREEZE ANSTEY

oblique superiority, with a maddening amusement and a thin nasal sneer which she was to discover, later, was habitual.

Explaining to her what tropical rain was really like, he addressed her again as 'Dear young lady'. She felt furious. She stared at him with crude dislike, openly. All the time Lorn was smiling, open-mouthed, teeth gay and white against her absurd lipstick. It was a smile in which there was something like a giddiness of adoration: the smile of utterly silly, uncritical feminine delight. She was in heaven.

It went on all through tea. It was like the functioning of some cheap machine into which Lorn kept pressing unseen coins in order to keep it working. To Breeze it was incomprehensible. It could not be genuine. She could not conceive of it as anything else but forced, the desperate mechanical reaction to the occasion.

The doctor talked. To Breeze he was an old man. He framed his sentences with the slow care of experience, searching for his words, as though engaged on some careful and perpetual diagnosis.

'When I first had — er — intimation of — of this — this project of yours, my dear, I had — er — some notion that you had taken — taken a place of some size.'

'It doesn't *look* big, dear,' Lorn said, 'but you try to work it and see.'

'But you said — you said a farm.'

'Well?'

'But this is — just a garden.'

'We call it a farm. It couldn't very well be bigger because of the forest.'

'The — the forest?'

He looked out of the window with a kind of amazed contempt, at their small, confined and now rain-flattened plot of earth, with the barricade of trees beyond and the heavy English sky pressing down on it all and giving it some air of civilized meanness. He looked in silence. Then he began laughing. It was, to Breeze, an extraordinary laugh, almost silent, impersonal and yet selfish, as though the joke were for himself alone and yet on them. He laughed for fully two

BREEZE ANSTEY

minutes before finally saying anything. Then he repeated 'Forest, forest', in the tone of a man who, though knowing everything, has a little pity for the rest of the world.

Breeze understood. She caught the accent, almost the sneer, of pity: pity for them, pity for their so-called farm, for their ideals, for two silly too-earnest Englishwomen with their pretence of ambition. Without saying it, he hinted that there were lives of which they knew nothing, forests beside which their own miserable affair was a shrubbery. He seemed to say: 'You may believe in it, but is it worth believing in? It can't be serious. It can't mean anything. And now that I've come it can't go on.'

Almost as though she heard it, Breeze said, frankly:

'You came home in a hurry, Dr. Bentley.'

He looked at her, then at Lorn, obliquely. 'I had business,' he said. He kept looking at Lorn, still obliquely, with a soft and almost crafty smile of adoration, until Lorn at last lifted her eyes and smiled back in a confusion of happiness. Their eyes, in silence, telegraphed secrets which were not secrets at all. 'Yes,' the doctor said, 'I had business. It's not — not for me to say how — important — it is. But I had business. That is so — eh, Lorn?'

The system of telegraphy, once begun, went on. After tea, and on into the misty heavy evening, the doctor and Lorn sat about in the little sitting-room and, whenever Breeze was there, sent each other messages of what was almost adolescent adoration. They spoke in riddles: restless, obvious riddles of which they were only too anxious that Breeze should know the meaning. They held out their love to her, as it were, on a plate, like some piece of juicy steak, inviting her to admire and, while indicating that it was not for her, to envy. She responded by muteness. She did not know what to say. Dumbly she sat and waited for the time when she could decently go to bed.

'Tempus fugit,' the doctor said, once.

'Yes, but slowly,' Lorn said, 'when you're waiting.'

'Everything comes,' the doctor said, 'to him who waits.'

At eight Breeze pleaded excuses and went up to bed.

BREEZE ANSTEY

After lying awake, listening to the slow summer drip of rain from the branches outside, she heard, at nine, the shutting and locking of doors, footsteps on the stairs, whispers, the small shufflings and rustling of retirement. She waited for Lorn to come into her, as always, to say good night. They would sit together, talk, confide, discuss the happenings of one day and their plans for another. She cherished the moment jealously.

She waited. Nothing happened. Then, towards ten, she heard a door, footsteps. They approached and went past. She heard the opening and shutting of another door, then silence.

She listened for a long time. There was no other sound. The rain had ceased and she could hear the silence, could feel it as something hard and tangible about her, as a crystallization of emptiness into solidity, into something as light and sharp as a knife, cutting her off from Lorn completely.

V I

By innuendoes, half-phrases, gestures of superiority, and above all by the sly oblique smile of pity, the doctor poured contempt on the little farm. For almost a week Lorn, bewildered by the pull of opposing emotions, wavered between the man and the ideal she and Breeze had set themselves. As though aware of it, the doctor said, at last:

‘I suppose you two — young things know that this — this place — isn’t healthy? It isn’t doing either of you any good.’

This was a shock; and Breeze at once resented it.

‘Who said it wasn’t healthy?’

The doctor was patient: which aroused her still more. She detested the assured enamel superiority of the man. Honest, decent anger, resentment, bitterness, had no place in his make-up. He presented only an assured too-smooth egg-like coldness. Her own anger, like some feeble Lilliputian pin, could not even scratch the iron shell of his supreme

BREEZE ANSTEY

priggishness. It was all hopelessly beyond her. Lorn and this man, this man for a lover.

Another time he said to her: 'Do you feel well?'

'Yes,' she said. 'As well as I ever did.'

'Which means?' He paused, waiting for a reply which did not come. 'You feel tired?'

'No.'

'Sleepy? No — no energy?'

'No.'

'Oppressed?'

'No.'

She was lying. He knew it and she, in a moment, knew that he was aware of it. 'Lorn tells me — quite — quite otherwise,' he said.

'I'm not Lorn,' she said.

'Lorn says you are both tired — er — continually — and can't understand it.'

'We work hard.'

'Perhaps so. But that would not account for this — this extraordinary enervation. The trouble is that there are too many trees in this place. They suck up the air.'

'That's your opinion. I like the trees.'

'May I take your pulse?' he said.

Before she could resist he had taken her hand, had his thumb on her wrist. It was as though she were held in a clasp of pure dead bone. In the feel of his hands she felt, as it were, the whole essence of his nature: hard, bony, dead, the expression of man seeing life as something to be perpetually diagnosed, the delicacy of human nature as something needing eternal probing and some ultimate interesting operation.

He dropped her hand. She felt, for a few seconds, the small cool point of the thumb's contact. She stood waiting resentfully, in silence. What had he to do with her? Why did he trouble with her? It was beyond her, this damnable solicitude, and she did not want it.

'You'll be telling me next,' she said, 'that I've got galloping consumption.'

BREEZE ANSTEY

For a moment he did not reply. They were in the little sitting-room. Lorn had gone to cut lettuces for the evening salad. It was a sultry, still evening, breathless.

'No, it's not that you've got,' he said. 'Will you sit down?'

'Why?'

'Just sit down. I want to ask you the same — er — questions as I asked Lorn.'

'What questions?'

'Well — er — just —'

'You're going to ask me to sleep with you, perhaps?' she said. She raised her voice, spoke without thinking, the words out of her mouth before she could prevent them. 'You're going to ask me to wait seven years for you, perhaps? No, thank you! Not today, thank you! No, *thank* you!'

He looked at her, smiling, the small chill oblique smile of professional reticence, as one accustomed to such ill-mannered outbursts. He did not speak. She set her teeth, waiting, meaning the words she had spoken with all her heart, yet wishing, now, that she had not spoken them. She stood poised somewhere between anger and embarrassment.

At that moment Lorn came in, carrying the already dew-wet lettuces.

'Hullo, you two,' she said. 'Quarrelling?'

'Yes!' Breeze said.

'Breeze!'

'He's got as far as taking my pulse — but that isn't far enough.'

Her anger quickened again, fired up in her face.

'He's not satisfied with coming here and taking you away. That isn't enough. He wants to prove the place isn't healthy. He wants to get *me* out of it.'

'Breeze, Breeze, I won't have it! I won't have it.'

'It's true. He's smashed our life.'

'You can't say it. I won't have you saying it.'

'Why, isn't it true? Before he came rushing home like a lovesick boy we were quite happy here. The farm was our whole life. You know that. We'd planned and schemed and

BREEZE ANSTEY

banked on it. We'd arranged for the organizer to come down. Now he comes rushing home and it all means nothing.'

'You mean you mean nothing!'

'Well, what difference? What difference whether it's me or the farm? He's trying to make you believe it's unhealthy. That means he either wants you to give me up or me to give up the farm. Well, I'll give up the farm.'

'Oh! Breeze, please. Please, not now.'

'I'll give it up, I tell you! You don't want me! What point in my staying? I'll clear out now — before I can change my mind.'

Suddenly she looked from Lorn to the man. He was smiling and the smile had that perpetual as though engraved mockery in it, the slightly oblique sneer of condescension, and she knew that he was not only laughing at her physical self, her behaviour, but her ideals, her anger and the very preciousness of her affection.

Suddenly rage burned up in her to a point when she could not control it. She went across to him and hit him full across the face. For a moment nothing happened. The smile did not change. It remained, like some rotten and yet imperishable engraving of his whole nature. Beside herself, almost crying, she struggled with a terrific desire to hit it again, to smash it out of existence. Then, suddenly, the smile, the rage, the reason for it all had no meaning. She went very weak. She had just strength enough to lift her voice and half shout:

'I'll get out in the morning. I'll go! There's not room for all of us.'

Lorn would have spoken, but Breeze ran out of the room. She was already crying. In the second before the door slammed she heard the faint condescending breath of a laugh from the doctor.

She lay in bed and cried with anguish and comfort. She waited for Lorn to come, clinging to the hope of reconciliation. It must have been about eight o'clock, and she lay for two hours, until darkness, before she heard a sound from below. Sounds came, then, and went, but nothing happened.

BREEZE ANSTEY

She lay in silence and could not sleep. She thought of Lorn. She saw Lorn physically, as a constant presence, comforting, large, so soft and maternal. She ached for her. She saw her as she had seen her in the forest, bathing, and she was caught up unexpectedly, by a return of the same singular moment of acute anguish, almost pain, that had shot through her at the first sight of Lorn's body.

Then, for the first time, she understood herself. She knew suddenly, what it was she resented, what exactly it was she had wanted, what she was so extraordinarily afraid of losing.

She sat up in bed. She had ceased crying and she felt, now, like a rag that has been wrung out. The cold realization of her feeling for Lorn struck her with fear, almost terror, as though she had suddenly become aware that she was incurably ill.

Simultaneously she saw also the reason for the doctor's smile: that perpetual smile of aloof knowingness. 'No, that's not what you've got.' He knew. Unconsciously she must have known that he knew. But curiously, for all her knowing, her rage against him did not lessen. He had struck so hard at her ideals, the little and now absurd farm, the business partnership, the hope of success. He had taken, and in a way, destroyed Lorn.

She lay for a long time. She hoped that Lorn would come. She wanted, and for the first time consciously, to be held by Lorn, tenderly, with the same love and strength as she felt in return. Something had taught her that a love of that kind belonged to the limbo of things that were never mentioned. To her, in the full realization of it, it seemed a beautiful thing. She cried tenderly because of it. It comforted her. There was some kind of sad inverted pleasure in the gentle pain of realization and loss.

At one o'clock she got up, lighted her candle and packed her bag. Going to shut the window she caught the great breath of the forest, damp, profound, summer-drenched, the smell of a whole section of her life. She stood for a moment breathing it in, looking over the dark quiet earth of the garden towards the still darker mass of trees. The night

B R E E Z E A N S T E Y

was deadly still. As it hung about her, huge and intangible, with an intolerable quality of suspense and comfort, her life seemed very little and not to matter.

She shut the window. She felt, at once, back in the cramped confinement of her own affairs, where things had seemed, a moment before, to be all over, but where they seemed, now, to be just beginning.

And she knew that the rest, whatever it was, lay with herself.

OLD

THE old man walked slowly up the street, pressing himself against the wind that violently blew open his jacket. It was Sunday afternoon. He had once been rather a tall man, with splendid muscular hands, black hair, and long strenuous legs. Now he took little shuffling steps, and pressed the whole quivering weight of his short body on his walking-stick. He was wearing a rather faded old-fashioned bowler hat and a black muffler folded round his neck and tucked away into his armpits. When the wind struck at him with sudden bursts of violence he seemed to have no contact with earth. It seemed as if the wind would whip him up and scatter him, as it does a piece of fragile charred paper from a fire.

At the top of the street the wind seized him and swung him across to the other pavement. He lifted his head and looked at the numbers of the houses. The wind had beaten tears into his eyes. Presently he grasped the iron railings in front of Number 67, pulling himself up the step which was like a fresh white tomb-stone, and fumbled his way into the house.

‘Wipe your feet!’

The words flew out of the front sitting-room like birds of prey. Aggie’s voice — his eldest daughter. The look in his tired wet eyes did not change, but he wiped his boots; not because they were dirty, only out of habit, automatically. Then he shuffled slowly across the passage, down which the linoleum lay like brown bright glass. He was still wearing his hat and muffler. He had not forgotten it: it was only that he liked to sit in the house with his hat and muffler on. Yes, he liked doing that. He liked doing that when they did not stop him.

Now he opened the sitting-room door and shuffled into the room. The tears made by the wind still lay in his eyes and the room was full of people. It was Aggie’s house. Aggie had never been married. Thirty years ago they used to say of Aggie that she polished the coal before she put it on the fire.

OLD

Now in the room there was a great Sunday shine of brass and porcelain. Tea was laid on the big round mahogany table that Aggie had fought so hard for when her mother died, and bright orange firelight shone on the Sunday crockery, the face of the piano, the pictures and on the faces of the family. It shone too into the tired wind-watered eyes of the old man, who saw his family as if they were figures on a bright tinsel postcard. He saw that Emma was there, with her husband, Clem. Clem was a foreman finisher. They had no family; Clem had a good job and they had saved money. Then there was Harry, his son. Once Harry and Clem and Emma hadn't spoken for fifteen months. Then another time Clem and Emma and Gladys hadn't spoken for six months. Clem and Emma were the mischief makers. Gladys, who was there too, was his niece. She was his brother Arthur's daughter, and now she had a daughter herself, a child of seven, who was sitting on the hearthrug. It was quite a large party. Gladys's husband, Albert, had a good job, travelling in washing-machines up and down the country. He had a car and did not often come home at week-ends and Aggie pretty well knew for a fact that during these times he was up to no good.

The greeting that the family started to give to the old man was silenced and snatched away by Aggie.

'Well, if he hasn't come in with his hat and muffler on I'll never!' she said. 'Just like a baby!'

'I'm all right,' he said. 'I want 'em on.'

'Never mind what you *want*,' she said, 'go and take 'em off.'

He went slowly back into the passage and took off his hat and muffler. Without them his neck and head felt strange and cold. While he was out of the room he heard Aggie say something about she'd bet anybody he'd been street-corner gossiping with Jim Clayton and that he was getting just like a baby again, forgetting things, forgetting his hat and muffler. Next thing they'd hear of he'd be forgetting who he was, then there'd be a nice howdy-do.

'Jim Clayton's bin bad a-bed this last week,' he said when he came back into the room again.

OLD

'Well, if it wasn't Jim Clayton,' she said, 'it was somebody else. That I do know.'

He did not ask how or why she knew it, but sat down.

'You needn't go sitting yourself down!' she said. 'Tea's ready, and bin ready this ten minutes. And while you've bin soodlin' along anyhow we've bin wasting good daylight.'

He began to say something about grudging a penny in the gas, but the family had already begun to gather round the table, voices and chairs clattering one against another, and nobody heard him. At the table he found himself between Harry, his son, and the little girl, Jean. She had fair bobbed hair, and a face as open and fresh as a water-lily. He took out his handkerchief and spread it surreptitiously across his lap, as a napkin, and while waiting for his tea, he looked out of the window. It was early November and already the daylight was dying quickly, and in the window, like pieces of fired bronze in the fire-light, there were vases of chrysanthemums.

His cup of tea came at last and he began to stir it, tasting it loudly from his spoon, putting the spoon back into his cup.

'Watch him, Harry,' Aggie said, 'you know what happened last week.'

Yes, something terrible had happened last week. He had knocked over his tea on the table-cloth. It had put Aggie into a rare temper and in her anger she had said something which he felt she might have been harbouring in her mind for a long time. She had said something about having had enough, that if he couldn't behave properly they might have to see that he was sent somewhere where he would.

He knew what that meant. Sooner or later they would send him to the Union. He picked up a piece of bread and butter, folding it slowly in his bony hands. He suddenly felt astonishingly hungry and began to cram piece after piece of bread into his mouth, washing it down with tea.

It was only after he had been eating for nearly five minutes that he realized what he had been doing. He had been drinking with his mouth full and more than that, with the spoon in his cup, and now all the family was watching him.

They were watching him as if for some reason they felt that the very old ought not to eat and drink with so much pleasure, even perhaps as if they ought not to eat at all.

He looked down at his plate. Like his cup, it was empty. Something now made him look at the little girl beside him. She had bitten her piece of bread and butter into the shape of a dog, and this dog was drinking tea out of her saucer. The little girl had shining yellow hair. For some reason he thought she was very like Aggie had been, and he wondered why people grew up and changed. Aggie with the fair shining hair was now Aggie with a thin soapy face, grey bunned-up hair, slight heart trouble, and a sour jealousy for the lives of others. During the last war she had been fore-woman in a clothing factory. She had saved money. This money was now invested in war-loan and the post office bank, and everybody in turn was bitterly jealous of Aggie because nobody knew just what the amount was.

He stopped thinking, and looked up. No one was now paying much attention to him, and he took the opportunity to help himself to a heavy slice of plum-cake.

And now, instead of thinking, he sat listening. Emma, who always stuck out her little finger while drinking, was saying how the days dropped in and how soon it would be dark before they'd finished dinner. It was a broad hint for Aggie to light the gas, but Aggie took no notice. Instead she opened up a new line of conversation and said was anyone going to Chapel?

Not if he knew it, Clem said.

Because Clem paid pew-rent at High Street Congregational, and had done so for many years, the remark was a sensation. Clem spoke with a great sense of grievance. He was something of a tenor and made a great show of singing with a tune-book, though he could not read a note. Emma had held a place among the High Street sopranos for thirty years, showing during all that time a misguided passion for descant at the wrong moments.

Well, it was something of a change to hear Clem speak like that, Aggie said.

OLD

To which Clem said there had been changes to make him speak like that. Big changes. Changes that he never thought he'd live to see happen.

Well, Aggie said, whatever *had* happened?

Didn't they know, Emma said, that she and Clem hadn't sat in the choir for three weeks?

Well, Aggie said. Well!

Signing on new blood? Harry said. He spoke almost for the first time. He had always been a man of sarcastic, laconic speech, who drank a little, strictly on the q.t., and had no use for chapel.

There was nothing to joke about, Clem said. It was no laughing matter, he went on in an unsteady, sensational voice, when he and Emma had been as good as turned neck and crop out of the choir in which they'd sat for thirty years!

Well, Aggie said, she'd never heard a word until now. Well!

She might well well! Emma said bitterly.

She was about to say how and why it was that she and Clem had ceased to sing in the choir when the old man suddenly felt himself cease listening. It was as if his mind broke away from the mass of bitterness and jealousy and fell down like a tired meteorite into the spaces of age, unable to keep the pace. Still hungry, he helped himself to a second slice of cake. As he did so, he looked again at the little girl. The dog made of bread and butter had gone now, to be replaced by a strange creature bitten out of a biscuit.

'What d'ye call that?' he said.

'It's a tiger,' she said. 'It's very froshus.'

He took a bite out of his cake. It was a nice game, he thought, and he called the little girl's attention to the fact that there was now an elephant on his plate.

'Is that froshus?' she said.

'No,' he said. 'It's just a tame elephant.'

'Where's its trunk?'

'I'm just making it,' he said. 'Here.'

He began to squeeze some of the cake in his fingers, elongating it, making the trunk. He did not feel old or tired any

OLD

longer. For some time he went on walking the elephant about his plate and table-cloth, making it at intervals meet the tiger, until at last the conversation carried on by Clem and Aggie and the rest of the family receded to a great distance, bringing only faint echoes of conflict and bitterness out of a real and darkening world to which he did not belong.

Suddenly the little girl got tired of the elephant and the tiger and began to eat the tiger. He came to himself too and began to eat the elephant. For an instant he felt tired, but then the little girl began talking again. She said how much she liked his hair.

‘It’s nice and white,’ she said. ‘I’d like to brush it.’

‘You eat your tea,’ he said, automatically, not knowing why he said it.

‘Can I brush it?’ she said. ‘Can I? Can I?’

He was about to say something else when he saw her slip down from the table. She went out of the room, and he was left to himself. For a few seconds reality beat upon him out of the darkening room. The chrysanthemums were colourless now except in the winks of the firelight. Out in the street the lamps were not yet lit and he could not see very clearly the faces of his family. Aggie was asking if anyone wanted another cup and Clem was saying that it was not as if he and Emma asked for favours or that they grudged anyone else having a chance, but in his opinion some of the old ones could still sing some of the young ones inside out. Anyway, he was saying finally, it had cured him for a bit. If that was chapel and religion, he said, then he’d stop at home.

Funny sort of religion, Harry said.

The remark was taken as a kind of heresy, and Aggie pounced on Harry, starting an argument, so that no one saw the little girl come back into the room. In the confusion of voices the old man pushed his chair back from the table. The little girl sat on his knee and he bent down his head to her. She had found a small white hair-brush, and now she began very gently and slowly to brush his hair. She went on brushing his hair for a long time, talking to him, telling him as if he were a child to keep still, to hold his head this way and that.

OLD

The repeated, soothing motions of her brushing produced on him a kind of mesmeric peace. There appeared on his face a look of lost and beautiful tranquillity, his eyes no longer wet or tired, his hands placidly at rest.

About him the conversation that he no longer wanted to follow was going on more bitterly. Emma and Harry were arguing loudly as to whether you went to church to worship the minister or whether you went to worship God Almighty, and Gladys, who had not spoken much, was trying to keep the peace. Harry, replying to Aggie, was saying warmly that it would be more sense if someone lit the gas. It was too dark to see your way to your mouth, he said, but Aggie flared back that if he couldn't see he must feel. His mouth was big enough.

Outside in the street, by this time, the lamps were alight. The bright greenish beams of light were coming into the window, turning the edges of the chrysanthemums to curls of tarnished silver. The old man sat staring at the flowers with a gaze of profound stillness, while the little girl tirelessly brushed his thin white hair.

In the conflict of voices no one seemed to be taking any notice of him now. In the falling darkness no one could tell what he was thinking.

A SCANDALOUS WOMAN

IN the days when he lived with his father and mother in the little Midland town, among the chapels and the factories, he would lie awake on hot summer nights and listen to the sound of late voices beating on the streets below like an uneven tide. In those days, before the wars, life was more robust, more physical, and yet in a sense more serene.

One summer, while he was still a boy, there was a great scandal about a woman named Anderson. He first knew that she was a scandalous woman because people, and also his father and mother, talked of her as if she had no name. They did not call her Lily Anderson or even Miss Anderson, but always her or she. She was a soprano singer. When she was about eighteen or nineteen she would take a solo every Sunday in the chapel choir: something very heavily moving like 'Ave Maria' or 'Abide with Me', or very tender, like 'With Verdure Clad'. But in a little provincial choir it is not singing that takes first place. In those days there was a great struggle among the female singers to get, and keep, a place in the front row of the choir stalls, so that sometimes the choir looked, from the pews below, like a great barricade of entrenched bosoms defending their hard-won positions. The arrival of Lily Anderson in the middle of the front row was an assault on those positions that created a great jealousy.

Up to that time there had been nothing very remarkable about Lily Anderson except that she was a nice singer. She was still only a girl, with black-brown eyes and hair and a rather solid little figure. Only her mouth seemed mature: heavier and riper than the rest of her body.

Then the scandal began. The minister of that day was a young man name Hadfield who was unmarried. He lived all alone in the manse with no help except a daily woman who came in to cook his breakfast and left in the early evenings. In a little provincial town it is a good thing for a minister to know, and cultivate, the right kind of people. The Reverend Hadfield ate the dull cold suppers of the local leather mer-

A SCANDALOUS WOMAN

chants and manufacturers and avoided treading on the toes of the Church Council. There was a family named Pendleton, a leather factor, and his wife and their one daughter, who as standards went in the district were very rich. The daughter had pale green flabby eyes like grapes that have lost their texture, and she wore brown stockings. It had been taken for granted, in an inconclusive kind of way, that in time he would marry her, but things turned out rather differently.

Perhaps the trouble arose out of the fact that he played the piano very well, and that Lily Anderson needed an accompanist. That summer it was very hot and Lily Anderson began to be seen going into the manse two and three and sometimes four evenings a week, wearing cool light summer dresses. As these visits became known they began to assume in the minds of the Pendletons and those entrenched in the front rows of the choir a strong flavour of ripe scandal.

By the end of that summer Lily Anderson was no longer singing solos in the choir. The boy who lay awake at night, listening to the sound of feet and voices beating like small summer night-waves on the street below, hardly knew what it was all about. He did not know quite why it was scandalous for a man to play the piano in a house so that a girl could practise her singing there.

But if this was a scandalous thing, there was something much more scandalous. From things he heard his mother and father and other people say he knew that Lily Anderson was still singing. But she was no longer singing for love or in the service of God; she was no longer singing pieces like 'Ave Maria' or 'With Verdure Clad'. She was singing songs like 'Let's All Go Down the Strand' and 'Love's old Sweet Song' in all the pubs and clubs of the town, and she was singing them on Sundays. In those days that was a wickedly scandalous thing.

In a year a young girl can change a great deal. When he saw Lily Anderson again it was early summer. He was walking in the town park with his father and mother on a Sunday afternoon. Crowds of people were standing or walking about the grass, listening to the Rifle Band. The chestnut trees,

A SCANDALOUS WOMAN

their leaves heavy in the sultry May sunshine, were in full blossom; the scent of many pink hawthorn trees was heavy and almost sickly on the air; the sun was bright on the silver instruments and the blue uniforms. Suddenly he saw the faces of people turning to look back at something in the crowd, and after a moment he saw a woman walking alone across the grass. She was wearing a white silk dress with a big black hat, large jet ear-rings, and long black open-work gloves reaching to the elbows of her plump white arms. Her ripe heavy lips were pouted slightly, with proud sulkiness: it was Lily Anderson.

As she came across the grass under the chestnut trees that were full of erect white and pink blossom it struck him that she was very beautiful. She had changed too. Now she had a deliberate and rather flashy haughtiness. Her figure had filled out, and the long white dress was cut so that when the breeze blew against the skirt the deep ripe lines of her legs were for an instant firmly and clearly carved. Much later it struck him too that she looked rather lonely: lonely, wounded, on the defensive. At the time it seemed to him that she could not have been more spectacular if she had been smoking a large cigar.

Later, from the way his mother and father talked, he got the impression that even the smoking of a cigar was not beyond her. But it was more than a year later before he saw her again. He was lying awake one evening when about eleven o'clock he heard a scrambled shouting of voices from the street below. He heard the boisterous arguments of men split by the screams and giggles of women, and then finally a burst of singing. It was the singing, slightly tipsy and wild, which made him get up and go to the window and look out. The street was still not dark. The summer night was very quiet and the singing was so clear and close that he recognized at once whose clear soprano voice it was. It seemed to him like a voice flung in defiance at the rows of silent, lightless, respectable houses.

That was almost the last he heard of Lily Anderson before she got married. That in itself was a kind of inverted scandal.

A SCANDALOUS WOMAN

Whether all the stories of her and the kind of men she kept company with were true or not he did not know, but in the end she got married, very suddenly, to a baker.

The baker's name was Brown: a small, bony-wristed man with the flesh of a plucked hen. Long hours in the bakery had turned him prematurely bald; his ragged floury moustache fell into his mouth. They used to say that he had once been a pastry-cook in a first-class establishment, and now and then there would suddenly appear in the bakehouse window a splendid, ornate iced cake inscribed with beautiful lettering for a wedding or a birthday, with a roughly printed card beside it, 'Made to Order'.

As the time went on there were children. The youth would see them crawling up and down the dirty stone steps of the bakery. The windows of the shop were never cleaned and the contents never really changed. Dusted with a heavy grey bloom of flour, nothing new appeared behind them except the occasional wedding-cake and sometimes a greasy cooked ham with its frill of crinkled paper. Somewhere behind the dirty flour-dust, the cob-webs, the ham and the cake, Lily Anderson had shut herself away.

Several years later, grown up, he went into the shop for the first time. Visitors had dropped in late and unexpectedly one summer evening at his mother's house, and she wanted to cut sandwiches. Though it was late he went out in order to try to buy a sandwich loaf and some ham. It was too late for most of the shops and it was some time before he thought of the baker's.

As he walked down the streets of houses he could smell the heavy odour of may-blossom from the surrounding gardens; he could see the white spires of chestnut bloom faintly luminous in the twilight air.

In the window of the bakehouse the shelves of board covered with dirty oil-cloth were empty. He pushed open the half-glass door and the spring-bell rang in the silence. The bakehouse was almost in darkness except for a blue jet of gas-flame by the doors of the closed oven. The fires were low but in the air there remained a warm close smell of bread.

A SCANDALOUS WOMAN

Some moments after the bell had stopped ringing he heard footsteps. Coming along the passage from the house they slopped on bare brickwork. He waited by the dusty counter. The brass latch of the door leading to the house was lifted at last, and in came Lily Anderson.

She put her tired dirty hands on the counter and looked at him. 'Well, what for you?'

'I wondered if you could let me have a sandwich loaf and some ham. I know it's late, but —'

'I got a loaf, but I dunno about ham.'

She walked across the bakehouse to get the loaf from a batch that stood on a closed kneading-trough. She walked slowly, slopping, as if her feet hurt her, and as she came back, saying, 'How much ham did you want then?' he recalled the day, fifteen years before, when he had seen her walking proudly and defensively under the chestnut trees in the park. He recalled how much he thought she had changed in one year and how beautiful she was. Now he looked at her face. It had the sullenness of dough beaten into incomplete submission. The dark hair had partially fallen down, the dark eyes had no light or beauty or uprightness in them. The heavy lips were sour.

'Well, there's your loaf.' She put the loaf down and then reached under the counter. 'This is about all the ham I got,' she said. 'It ain't much.'

She set down on the counter a meat dish containing the end of a ham-bone still decorated with its pink frill of paper.

'How much did you say y' wanted? It aint much I know. But it's all I got.'

'About a pound,' he said.

She wiped her hands on her dirty pinafore and then picked up the ham-bone by the frill, turning it over.

'I tell you what,' she said. 'Whyn't you take the bone as it is? You'll get a lot o' meat off it yet.'

'How much?' he said.

'A shilling won't hurt, will it?' she said.

'No,' he said. 'I'll take it.'

A SCANDALOUS WOMAN

As she wrapped up the ham-bone, she lifted her face. 'Keep the frill on?' she said, 'or don't you want it?'

'I don't know. Keep it on,' he said.

The sullen shoulders drooped again over the wrapping of the parcel. The dark eyes were lifted no higher than the palm of his hand as he held out the money.

'That's just right,' she said.

He thanked her, and said good night.

'Thanks,' she said.

She stood with her heavy, shapeless body pressed against the counter, and then with a sort of sullen indifference, but without another movement or a word, watched him go.

Outside, slightly pausing, he turned and glanced back at the fly-blown windows, the cob-webs and their light grey powdering of flour. But the woman had gone now and beyond the windows there was visible in the falling darkness only the great closed doors of the oven and the small light of the almost extinguished flame.

QUARTETTE

‘WE’LL begin with “Drink To Me Only”,’ George Abrahams said.

As he spoke Miss Appleby and Mrs. Williams took up their places beside him at the piano, with Tom Willis on the far left hand. Miss Appleby, a rather plain, dry-humoured girl who wore gold spectacles and a plum-coloured velvet frock, sang contralto, and Tom Willis tenor. As for Dora Williams, there was not a more beautiful soprano in the town, perhaps in the county, than this tall reserved girl with silky yellow hair and large meditative eyes.

George Abrahams gave a chord on the piano, waited a moment, and then counted one, two, three. At the given moment the quartette broke into singing that filled the small front room of George Abrahams’s house, where they met two and sometimes three or four nights a week for practice. On the top of the piano copies of part songs, some in manuscript that George Abrahams had himself arranged for four voices, were carefully laid out in neat piles. On the table by the fire there were the usual piles of ham and cheese sandwiches that his wife had prepared, the usual two bottles of elderberry wine, the usual cut wine-glasses that the bright firelight seemed already to have filled with dancing sherry.

As they sang, George Abrahams listened critically to each individual voice. Last week Tom Willis had had a slight cold, but now both he and Miss Appleby were in first-rate voice. Miss Appleby was a singer who never varied — always the same splendid, warm attack, the same deep brown colour in her voice. She was an excellent reader too, and would have done herself justice in the best choirs anywhere. And in a district that had never been noted for tenors Tom Willis was a very good one, if a trifle on the light side. His great weakness was that he was a slow reader. He was a tall man with unaccountably gentle manners. He did not speak much, was not married, and did not seem to trust himself with women. He sometimes gave the impression of being too much

QUARTETTE

of an idealist and always sang best in pieces, such as lullabies, that demanded the greatest tenderness of feeling.

One of George Abrahams's objects, on forming the quartette six months before, had been to aim for perfect balance of tone, but he could not help noticing that tonight Dora Williams was singing in far finer voice than the rest. There was a slight lift in her voice that disturbed the final balance of harmony. It was almost as if she were singing too beautifully for the others.

At the end of the piece he did not say anything, and they went on to try out two pieces of Schubert which he himself had arranged for mixed voices, 'Ständchen' and 'Who is Sylvia?' In both songs the clear beauty of her voice seemed to stand out more plainly than ever. He detected something bright and nervous in her delivery, and once when he glanced up at her she was staring with very large disquieted eyes at a picture on the wall, lost in feelings completely remote from the song.

They went on for more than an hour trying out these songs and one or two others, and the time passed quickly. Now and then George Abrahams would stop them, making a criticism. At the end of each piece they had a brief general discussion and Miss Appleby, who was a good constructive musician, would say that this or that could be improved, that *allegro* rather than *allegro moderato* might be better here or there. He noticed that Dora Williams did not say much. Her eyes, which normally could not be other than frank even when most meditative and were sometimes full of immense vivacity, seemed obscured and depressed, in direct contrast with the strange brightness of her voice.

'Well,' he said at last, 'let's try "Ständchen" over once more, and then give it a rest and have some sandwiches.'

'What about the broadcast audition?' Miss Appleby said.

'Heard nothing yet,' he said hurriedly. 'Ready?'

They sang 'Ständchen' through once more. He forced himself not to listen to Dora Williams's voice, but concentrated instead on the warm tranquil brownness of Miss Appleby's contralto and on Tom Willis, who had warmed up now and

QUARTETTE

was singing better than ever. He felt pleased when it was all over, and he got up from the piano rubbing his hands.

'Well, it went splendidly,' he said. 'Tom, you're in grand voice.'

'They say tenor singing is a disease,' Miss Appleby said. 'That probably means he's got a singing temperature.'

They all laughed, and George Abrahams began to hand round the sandwiches. When he got to Dora Williams he saw that she alone was no longer laughing. 'Sandwich?' he said. 'Cheese this side. Ham that.'

He noticed that she did not look at the plate when she took her sandwich, and that she was not listening when he asked if she would like a glass of wine, so that he had to ask her again.

'Oh! no,' she said. 'No. No thanks, George. No, I don't think so.'

He went back to the table, put down the plate of sandwiches, and uncorked the wine. As he poured the wine he had a delightful feeling of pleasure in the moment: the deep purple wine veined by upward glances of fire, the great scent of the bowls of winter hyacinths from the window ledge, the strange exaltation in his throat after singing. He stood too on the verge of a more exciting moment. 'Hold your glasses a moment,' he said. 'I've got something to say.'

He gave a glass of wine each to Miss Appleby and Tom Willis, and then waited for a moment.

'It's about the audition,' he said at last. He waited again for a fraction of a second. 'It's fixed for a week on Tuesday. I didn't want to tell you until we'd had the practice.'

'I'll never trust a bass again,' Miss Appleby said dryly.

'Well,' he said, 'here's the letter.'

Quite excited now, Miss Appleby took the letter and read it and then gave it to Tom Willis. They both made some enthusiastic remark and then after a few moments George Abrahams took it back and handed it to Dora Williams.

She took the letter, but George Abrahams saw that she made no attempt to read it. Already she had turned slightly pale, and he saw a sudden tremendous nervousness take hold

QUARTETTE

of her. Her fear of showing this nervousness was concentrated into her eyes, which were now as dead as slate. He saw her try to say something, but without success, and then try again and at last form her words. 'I've got something to say myself.'

For a moment she looked really ill. He looked at her patiently and quietly, puzzled, and asked her what it was, but for another moment she could not say anything. Then she said quickly, 'I shan't be coming again.'

'Not coming?' Miss Appleby said. 'But the audition, Dora.'

George Abrahams could not speak.

'No, I shan't be coming again,' Dora Williams said. 'I'm giving up the quartette.'

'But why on earth?' Miss Appleby said.

She did not speak, and again George Abrahams asked her gently what was the matter. At last she got it out, hurriedly, almost coughing it up, like something distasteful she had swallowed.

'Jimmy's jealous,' she said.

Jimmy was her husband. As soon as she spoke George Abrahams felt an enormous relief. He looked at her strained sad face and burst out laughing.

'Jealous of what?' he said. 'Not me, I hope?'

She shook her head a little, not speaking.

'He's just jealous, is that it? Just jealous because his wife sings in a quartette two nights a week?'

'Yes.'

'Nothing else?' he said. 'Just that?'

'Yes.'

'Well, my God!' he said. 'My God.'

He turned abruptly away from her. As he turned he had on his lips all sorts of things about the monstrosity of it that he wanted to say — the littleness of it, the thoughtlessness, the casual breaking up of the dreams and happiness of four people — but he was less angry than exasperated, and all he could say was 'Jealous? Jealous of what? Jealous of who? What made him jealous?'

As he turned, he saw the face of Tom Willis. His eyes heavily disturbed, were looking straight at Dora Williams. He

QUARTETTE

had assumed a kind of pained frailty, his arms loose at his sides, and he was looking at her with a sort of tender alarm.

George Abrahams could not say anything. He felt that what he had to say was no longer important. Already the quartette had ceased to exist. He could not argue. In silence he stood looking down at the untouched glass of wine in his hands.

The situation was saved by Miss Appleby, who said, 'Well, rather than cry about it, let's sing again.'

He hesitated, but before he could make up his mind Dora Williams said yes, it was a good idea. She would like to sing again. It would get it off her chest.

'Let's sing "Ständchen" again,' Miss Appleby said. The thought of the song momentarily upset her and she said: 'You mean you're never coming again? But why? There's no reason for it. No excuse. It's not right!'

No one spoke, and George Abrahams put down his glass on the table. His hands were shaking and suddenly he asked Miss Appleby if she would mind taking the accompaniment this time. She said yes and she sat down and began to play the first notes of the Schubert very softly.

George Abrahams stood between Tom Willis and Dora Williams, who did not look at each other. As soon as he opened his mouth he knew that he was going to sing very badly, and a second later, for the first time in his experience, he was hearing Miss Appleby forcing her notes, the warm ripe texture of her voice dry and broken. But he could hear on either side of him the voices of two people singing out of a deep preoccupation, with painful beauty. He thought he could feel the passionate quality of their singing transcending the small hot room and the small bewildered minds of Miss Appleby and himself.

When the singing was over he did not speak. He saw the hands of Miss Appleby as motionless on the piano keys as the wax flowers of the hyacinth in the window. He saw the light of the fire caught up again by the wine, and was aware of the strange upheaval of silence that comes after singing.

THE GOAT AND THE STARS

EVERY morning, when he came into the town, going to school, he would see this large and to him discomfoting notice in blue and scarlet letters on a board outside the church. It had been there since a month before Christmas. 'Annual Collection of Christmas Gifts in this Church on Christmas Eve. Help Us to Help Others. No Gift too Large. None too Small. Give generously.' And then, in very much larger, startling and to him almost angry letters: 'THIS MEANS YOU!'

He was a small, extremely puzzled-looking boy with a look of searching determination on his rather thin lips. Large brown trousers, which looked as if they had been cut down from his father's, gave him a curious look of being out of place in the world. His hair looked as if it had been shorn off with sheep shears; his forehead had in it small, constant knots of perplexity. There was always mud on his boots and, though he did not know it, there were times when he did not smell very sweet.

There was a reason for this smell. His father and mother had a small farm-holding of about ten acres two miles out in the country. On a little pasture they grazed a mare and two or three cows, with a score of foraging hens. Outside the house ran a wide strip of roadside verge, and here they grazed a dozen goats. It was because of the goats that the boy sometimes created a very pungent and startling impression. He was very fond of the goats and it was his job to tether them on the roadside grass every morning and again, if he were home before darkness fell, to house them up in the disused pigsty for the night. He treated the goats like friends. He knew that they were his friends. At frequent intervals the number of goats was increased, but his father could never sell the kids or even give them away. The boy was always glad about this and now they had thirteen goats: the odd one a kid of six weeks, all white, as pure as snow.

Every morning when he went by the church the notice had

THE GOAT AND THE STARS

some power of making him uneasy. It was the challenge in larger letters, **THIS MEANS YOU!** that troubled him. More and more, as Christmas came near, he got into the habit of worrying about it. The notice seemed to spring out and hit him in the face; it seemed to make a hole in his conscience. It singled him out from the rest of the world: **THIS MEANS YOU!**

Soon, as he walked down from the country in the mornings and then back again in the evenings, he began to think if there was anything he could do about it. It seemed to him that he had to do something. The notice, as time went on, made him feel as if it were watching him. Once he had heard a story in which there had been a repetitive phrase which had also troubled him: **God Sees All**. Gradually he got into his head the idea that in addition to the notice God, too, was watching him. In a way God and the notice were one.

It was not until the day before Christmas Eve that he decided to give the goat-kid to the church. He woke up with the decision, lying as it were, in his hands. It was as if it had been made for him and he knew that there was no escaping it.

He had already grown deeply fond of the little goat and it seemed to him a very great thing to sacrifice. That day there was no school and he spent most of the afternoon in the pigsty, kneeling on the strawed floor, combing the delicate milky hair of the little goat with a horse comb. In the sty the powerful congested smell of goats was solid, but he did not notice it. It had long since penetrated his body and whatever clothes he wore.

By the time he had finished brushing and combing the goat he had begun to feel extremely proud and glad of it; he had begun to get the idea that no other gift would be quite so beautiful. He did not know what other people would give. No gift was too great, none too small, and perhaps people would give things like oranges and nuts, perhaps things like toys and Christmas trees. There was no telling what would be given. He only knew that no one else would give quite what he was giving: something small and beautiful and living, that was his friend.

When the goat-kid was ready he tied a piece of clean string

THE GOAT AND THE STARS

round its neck and tethered it to a ring in the pigsty. His plan for taking it down into the town was simple. Every Christmas Eve he had to go and visit an aunt who kept a small corner grocery store in the town, and this aunt would give him a box of dates for his father, a box of chocolates for his mother and some sort of present for himself. All he had to do was to take the kid with him under cover of darkness. It was so light that he could carry it in his hands.

He got down into the town just before seven o'clock. Round the goat he had tied a clean meal-sack, in case of rain. When the goat grew tired of walking he would carry it in his arms; then when he got tired of carrying it the goat would walk again. Only one thing troubled him. He did not know what the procedure at the church would be. There might, he imagined, be a long sort of desk, with men in charge. He would go to this desk and say, very simply, 'I have brought this,' and come away.

He was rather disconcerted to find the windows of the church full of light. He saw people, carrying parcels, going through the door. He saw the notice, a little torn by weather now, but still flaring at him: THIS MEANS YOU! and he felt slightly nervous as he stood on the other side of the street, with the kid at his side, on the string, like a little dog.

Finally when there were no more people going into the church and it was very quiet he decided to go in. After taking the sacking off the kid he took it into his arms, smoothing its hair into place with the nervous tips of his fingers.

When he went into the church he was surprised to find it almost full of people. There was already a sort of service in progress and he sat hastily down at the end of a pew, seeing at the other end of the church, in the soft light of candles, a reconstruction of the manger and Child and the Wise Men who had followed the moving star. The stable and its manger reminded him of the pigsty where the goats were kept, and his first impression was that it would be a good sleeping-place for the kid.

He sat for some minutes before anything happened. A clergyman, speaking from the pulpit, was talking of the grace

THE GOAT AND THE STARS

of giving. 'They,' he said, 'brought frankincense and myrrh. You cannot bring frankincense, but what you have brought has a sweeter smell: the smell of sacrifice for others.'

As he spoke a man immediately in front of the boy turned to his wife, sniffing, and then whispering:

'Funny smell of frankincense.'

'Yes,' she whispered. She too was sniffing now. 'I noticed it but didn't like to say.'

They began to sniff together, like dogs. After some moments the woman turned and saw the boy, sitting tense and nervous, the knots of perplexity tight on his forehead and the goat in his arms.

'Look round!' she said.

The man turned and now he too saw the goat.

'Well!' he said. 'Well, no wonder!'

'I hate them,' the woman whispered. 'I hate that smell.'

They began sniffing now with deliberation, attracting the attention of other people, who too turned and saw the goat. In the pews about the boy there was a flutter of suppressed consternation. Finally, at the instigation of his wife, the man in front of the boy got up and went out.

He returned a minute later with an usher. Before going back to his pew he whispered:

'There. My wife can't stand the smell.'

A moment later the usher was whispering into the boy's ear, 'I'm afraid it's hardly the right place for this. I'm afraid you'll have to go out.' At the approach of a strange person the little goat began to struggle, and suddenly let out a thin bleat of alarm. As the boy got up it seemed to him that the whole church turned and looked at him partly in amusement, partly alarm, as though the presence of the kid were on the fringe of sacrilege.

Outside, the usher pointed down the steps. 'All right, son, you run along.'

'I wanted to give the goat,' the boy said.

'Yes, I know,' the man said, 'but you got the wrong idea. A goat's no use to anybody.'

The boy walked down the steps of the church into the street, the goat quiet now in his arms. He did not look at the

THE GOAT AND THE STARS

notice which had said for so long THIS MEANS YOU! because it was clear to him now that he had made a sort of mistake. It was clear that the notice did not mean him at all.

Outside the town he walked slowly in the darkness. The night air was silent and the kid seemed almost asleep in his arms. He was not now troubled that they did not want the goat, but was already glad that it would be his again.

It was only by some other things that he was troubled. He had for a long time believed that at Christmas there must be snow on the ground, and bells ringing, and a moving star.

But now there was no snow on the ground. There were no bells ringing, and far above himself and the little goat the stars were still.

ALEXANDER

EARLY one August morning a curious black cart on low springs, drawn by a little shaggy pony with a tail that swept about its legs like a skirt, jogged steadily off from a narrow street bordering the river, climbed in a leisurely manner through the town, and began travelling slowly and almost sleepily eastward towards open country.

In the cart, half concealed by piles of creaking baskets, sat a small, fair-haired boy of eleven or twelve, with drowsy blue eyes; and by his side a fat, sunburnt man with white hair, dressed in breeches and black leggings and a red waistcoat, evidently put on with special care and worn with special pride. All the buttons of this garment resembled fishes' eyes, and a good many cunning pockets were concealed in every part of it, inside and outside, back and front. A silver watch-chain dangled across it, bearing handsome engraved medals won for fishing and shooting. Something about the waistcoat, perhaps the medals themselves, seemed to attract the boy, for he sat very still, his head to one side, gazing at it. Sometimes he looked exactly as if about to drop off to sleep, his head nodding and his eyes shutting with a kind of thankful bliss. At these moments, as if regarding this as the pleasantest, most flattering thing in all the world, the man would turn on him a gaze mild with approbation and beatitude. He crouched as he drove, flapping the reins gently on the pony's back, and from time to time would raise his head and stare across the plain at the countless cornfields and orchards stretching away to an horizon darkened by misty woods lying upon it like sleeping giants.

For a mile or more the cart drove on in this fashion, the boy still half asleep, the man meditative, the pony never changing its pace. The sun rose up, at first like a fluffy yellow ball, then like a disc of polished brass. Trees, cornfields, farms, pastures, horses and workmen among the mown corn all appeared instantly bathed in a soft transfiguring light. Objects a great distance off, little towers, smoking chimneys, village spires, became lightly pencilled into the scene. The sun ran

ALEXANDER

swiftly over the plain, pursuing lines of black shadow. A covey of partridges scurried, screamed, then spread out like a black fan and vanished, the barley ears waving briefly and lightly where they came to earth. Slowly the woods resolved themselves; the trees stood in sharp, unbroken line; then the dew became visible in manifold, glittering drops, giving the parched grasses a look of fresh life, hanging upon the trees like ladies' earrings and covering each of the black and crimson berries on the hedgeside like a shell of glass. Soon everywhere was under a warm stillness; all the mist dispersed stealthily and silently, without wind, and the trees seemed to stoop with an invisible burden of heavy airs and the rich loveliness of the ripening year.

As the cart went on, a black shadow began to glide steadily by the horse's side, and a strong fresh scent, with something autumnal about it, began to blow swiftly into the nostrils of the boy, who could feel the sun growing warmer and warmer on his closed lids and on his cheeks and hands.

Presently the man took out his watch and remarked in a soft bass voice: 'Nearly nine.' The boy raised his head and yawned, but did not answer.

Little by little the nature of the country began to change. Gentle hills and a long shallow valley with a white stream appeared. Soon a vast and magnificent view unfolded like a picture.

Being long-sighted, the man would rest his eyes upon remote objects like windmills, water-towers, specks that were cattle or harvesters. All at once his eyes sparkled with eagerness and he began to nudge and pummel the boy into a state of wakefulness and attention. At last he tightened the reins and called excitedly, half standing up among the baskets:

'Alexander! Alexander! Boy, look, look! What is it? Can you see? Open your peepers, Alexander, and just look, look, look. What do you make of it?'

And the boy, excited also, sat upright.

'Hérons!' the man whispered.

As the boy gazed up the word was repeated several times, more and more excitedly. Two large, beautiful birds appeared

ALEXANDER

overhead, flapping their way with splendour towards the east, silently and impressively, with the sun shining golden upon them at sudden intervals. The cart had come for the first time to a standstill. The little horse stood quietly panting. Nothing else could be heard; only the strange golden stillness seemed to ring like the dim echo of a bell over everything as they watched the birds, two diminishing shapes becoming swallowed in the depth of blue sky.

After a long interval, during which the boy emerged for the first time into unconfused wakefulness, the man flapped the reins and remarked:

'I used to know a man who stuffed birds, specially herons. If I'd had a gun just now I might have knocked that pair down for him. He was a masterpiece. For all you knew they might as lief have been alive as dead.'

The cart moved forward again. The boy, on whom the herons had made a great impression, suddenly remarked:

'You shouldn't shoot birds, not even sparrows.'

'Sparrows are pests,' said the man. 'That's law, Alexander. You can't get away from the law.'

'God might strike you, all the same,' said the boy.

'God what?' uttered the man, as if astonished or not catching the words. 'God what did you say?'

'It's been known! Ursula told me about a man who had stolen a calf from a widow woman and while he was eating it afterwards, God struck him.'

'How? Struck him?'

'I don't know how. Ursula says——'

'Never mind what Ursula says! The woman's all nonsense and popery. Never you mind what she says, the old fool. There's no truth in it.'

The boy did not speak. To all this conversation he had listened gravely, taking everything to heart. Each time he looked at the man, his uncle, he was overcome with reverence and admiration. Nevertheless, there was a warm note of affection between them. Often something serious and mature lurked in Alexander's eyes; and frequently from the other's some child-like and naïve light shone down upon him.

ALEXANDER

The cart proceeded at the same unvarying pace as before. Now the boy sat upright. The hot morning sun began to burn him. Gradually the sky assumed a richer shade of blue and the grasses began to give off a little vapour. The boy began to take a great interest in what was going on, his mind dwelling on the day ahead — where they were going, what would take place, how much longer they must drive. He tried often to picture the great house to which he understood they were driving, the long avenues of plums and pears, the over-reaching apple trees, the walls bearing peaches, apricots and even quinces in great abundance, and the old, wizened, solitary creature who lived in this house surrounded by many brown-and-black dogs and a white cat which she never allowed out of sight. He pondered for a long time, but without enlightenment, on this strange creature who sold fruit to his uncle — ‘Because, Mr. Bishop, you knew me when I was a girl and I can trust you not to break the trees and put the wrong measure in the basket for yourself,’ and sometimes he pictured the garden with great success, almost smelling the warm ripeness given off by fruits and leaves.

‘What time shall we be there?’ he looked up and asked.

The man was lighting his pipe and to Alexander it seemed a long time before he answered:

‘A little after ten if we don’t stop anywhere. Are you hungry? Ursula put some cheese-cakes in the basket in case you were hungry.’

He was not hungry. In spite of this and though he considered Ursula’s cheese-cakes very moderate indeed, he ate two and, while eating loosened the collar of his shirt. The sun was hot on his face and neck. A little afterwards the road turned abruptly to the left, and from the hot stillness of the open country they passed suddenly into a cool wood of beeches, oaks and firs, to the accompaniment of stirring leaves and branches, a fitful talking of birds, a gentle whispering of a thousand unknown mysterious voices.

‘The house sits that way, on the far side of the wood,’ said the man, pointing the whip.

Alexander looked into the wood, from which now and then

ALEXANDER

broke strange scuffling noises. He saw nothing but a vast extent of trees with a glimpse of some fungi as large as pancakes and bright orange in colour. All the leaves, twigs, grasses were dripping with dew, setting up everywhere a kind of watery music, as if from a hidden spring. Drops fell from the overhanging branches and plopped on the cart and the baskets and even on his hands.

Something red appeared along the road. Before long it grew large and life-like and resolved into a woman in a red woollen jacket and a black skirt, carrying a basket. His uncle suddenly began whistling and gave the horse a playful flick as if he were very happy.

From that moment, until they drew level with the woman, the man stared hard at the black skirt, and when they came closer brought the little horse to a walk and tried to catch a glimpse of the woman's face, which was turned away from them. Suddenly she started violently at the sound of wheels, and turning sharply, almost dropped her basket.

His uncle ceased whistling. 'I thought so! Annie Fell, my girl!' he shouted at once. 'It is you! Yes, it's you right enough. Thinks I, coming all along the road, that's Annie Fell's walk, it's like her father's. God bless me! You look well. Mushrooms! So you got up before you went anywhere this morning. Well, God bless me, God bless me.'

While speaking he slapped one knee in astonishment. Alexander took in the woman's fresh, plump features, her sturdy body and the immense yellow bunch of hair, too heavy to be held up, falling like fine wool about her neck and shoulders.

'Oh! it's Eli. It's so long since we saw you.'

'Yes! Seven or eight years. At Pollyanna's wedding. Ah, how's Pollyanna?'

'Ah, she's poorly. Her legs keep swelling. She ain't good for much.'

'That's no good. A woman needs good legs...' There was a pause, as if this statement had added to the sum of human knowledge or had a mysterious, subtle meaning. Alexander felt awkward and took his eyes away from the

ALEXANDER

woman and was relieved when his uncle broke the silence again.

‘How’s your father, my girl?’

She looked up and said in a weary, disillusioned voice, ‘He ain’t worth a hatful of crabs, either. He’s had an operation and every drop and tittle he has Cilla and I have to put down him with a spoon. We have a life with him.’

‘So they cut him, did they?’

‘There’s cuts on him as long as a kidney bean, and a bit longer, I’ll swear,’ she said.

‘That’s no good to a man. It’s all knifing and butchery with doctors. What do they care? What’s the like of me and you to one of them? They want to see what’s inside you, and so out comes the knife and you’re half way to Kingdom Come without a chance to say “Our Father.” Ah! . . . Are you going home? Give me your basket then, and get up and we’ll put you down at the house. No, I don’t hold with this butchery.’

He shook his head gravely and vehemently. The woman climbed into the cart and sat between the boy and his uncle. Alexander remained silent and reserved. When they drove off he concentrated his attention on the wood, looking for jays, squirrels and mushrooms. But often he glanced at the woman furtively, attracted by something warm about her, and the thought of the unfortunate man with cuts as long as beans on his body would trouble him strangely, until he felt that he would be glad when they were alone once more, only his uncle and himself and the little horse bearing them steadily forward into the unfamiliar, golden country.

He observed with relief, a little later, a break in the woodland and a small stone house with snug, diamond-paned windows, tucked away in the clear space. A number of hens and geese, with a white goat, were bobbing hither and thither like scraps of paper on the surrounding grass, and a warm smell of animals and burning wood reached him. Uncle Bishop brought the cart to a standstill and the woman alighted.

Alexander felt as if he had been pressed in a little box. His

ALEXANDER

body seemed shrunken and he would have been thankful to have driven off without delay. But, looking up, the woman said:

‘You must come in and say half a word to him——’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Eli, gazing at the distance. ‘We’ve a long way to go.’

‘Don’t say you won’t have a glass,’ she went on, as if pleading. ‘You haven’t so far but what it might be a little farther.’

And to Alexander’s disappointment and annoyance his uncle began to alight also. The boy sat still, holding the reins, glaring. His heart sank lower. And in a not very convincing tone he suddenly said:

‘I’ll sit here.’

‘Oh! but the horse can look after itself,’ said the woman.

They both looked at him. ‘Make haste,’ said his uncle.

‘It’s Fanny’s boy; you know Fanny,’ he explained to the woman.

‘Fanny’s boy! So that’s Fanny’s boy? Well, well, I knew your mother years ago. You tell her you saw Annie Fell.’

‘Ah, that’s right, there’s something for you to remember.’

So he followed them across the grass, through a wicket-gate and into a garden flanked by trees. A grey sheep-dog lay like a rug across the doorstep, dozing. The door stood open. Uncle Bishop and the woman entered, but Alexander lingered behind, trying to look as if the sheep-dog interested him, though secretly he was afraid of dogs.

‘Cilla! Cilla!’ the woman began to call upstairs. ‘Cilla, here’s a visitor. Ah! you couldn’t guess in a month of Sundays.’

‘Let’s go up,’ she said.

She removed her hat, and Uncle Bishop began to follow her heavily up some narrow stairs. At their departure the sheep-dog opened his eyes, got lazily to his feet and pattered after them. Alexander began to wonder if he too ought to go, but presently feet resounded overhead and a murmur of voices floated down, and he felt that he had been forgotten.

A little time passed. The sun was hot on his face, and the wooden lintel burned against his hand. Nothing stirred. In

ALEXANDER

the dense sheltered growth of the garden there was not a breath, not a petal or leaf in motion. Bees would appear and spend a little time among some yellow dahlias and then surge away.

Absolute silence seized all things. Alexander began to look for something to occupy his mind, and, turning to the house, he caught sight of a double-barrel sporting gun standing by the wall. The gun was very handsome and fascinating, and though he dare not touch it, he remained gazing at it for a long time, imagining himself taking aim. Presently, tiring of the gun, he looked about the room. It had a low, curious aspect and an appearance of being very old. Some tall geraniums, pink and milk in colour, bloomed in the window, their pretty silken petals falling on a lace-cushion, hung with bunches of bobbins, standing beneath. A chain of birds' eggs was looped over a looking-glass, and a blue enamel bowl of small dark plums stood on the floor.

Presently, as he was scrutinizing a photograph of some soldiers and wondering if they had ever fought with Zulus, a curious, rhythmical noise, like that of a purring cat, startled him. It seemed to him to issue from a door standing half-open by the stairs.

He tiptoed towards the door, stood for a moment very still, and then poked in his head. He recoiled with great haste immediately, trembling.

In the room an old woman, an incredibly astoundingly old woman, with a face like a dried lemon and scarcely any hairs on her head, sat asleep with her hands locked together in her lap, clasping a yellow comb. Her mouth opened regularly the smallest fraction, and emitted a strange half-whistling, half-purring sound. His startled mind refused to think who she might be, or what she was doing there, but retained only the awful, haunting impression that her closed eyes were staring at him through their bluish lids.

He turned and retreated hurriedly. As he reached the garden something stirred there also and the hot stillness was broken by the noise of footsteps coming. He waited, a little nervously, and then, without any other hint or warning, he

ALEXANDER

found himself face to face with a young girl. He looked at her, but did not move, and again nothing seemed to take place in his mind. Only his eyes did their work, drinking in the impression of her pretty, delicate face, her soft neck and her light hair almost the colour of barley. Each impression smote him sharply, until his breast seemed as if about to burst with its own throbbing. In a strange way, without deliberation, he idealized her at once, thinking that he must be careful how he spoke to her and how he acted before her, and he felt acutely conscious of his physical self and was filled with the impression that everything about her, her large profound blue eyes, the yellow pansy tucked in her hair, the little printed flowerets on her dress and also the plums in her basket, were all staring at him, astonished and unflinching.

After a little silence she began to move in his direction. As she came nearer the look of dumb astonishment on her face increased.

Not knowing what to do, Alexander muttered stupidly:

‘I’m waiting for someone.’

In rather a soft, drawling voice, and looking first towards the road and then at him, she said slowly in reply:

‘Did you come in that cart?’

‘Yes, that’s our cart,’ he said quickly. Then, as if to appear at ease, he added:

‘You didn’t notice if the horse had moved on, I expect, did you?’

‘No, he hadn’t moved.’

‘That’s all right,’ he said. ‘I only wondered, because he’s a bit restless in summer.’

She remained silent, and feeling this silence acutely, he remarked:

‘They’re nice plums,’ not daring to look into her face, but simply gazing at the dark blue fruit instead.

‘They fall off and I have to pick them up every morning,’ she told him. ‘Look at my hands.’

He cast a brief glance at her stained fingers and felt immediately in some way flattered because she had asked him to do so.

ALEXANDER

'They're eating plums, I suppose,' he remarked.

Suddenly, without answering, she moved past him, and thinking that he had perhaps offended her and that she was about to disappear irrevocably, he called rather timidly after her:

'I suppose I could have a look at the garden?'

She called back at once:

'Wait a moment, I'll take you down.'

Almost simultaneously with this she reappeared, now with an empty basket.

'Perhaps I'd better make certain about the horse; he won't stand in hot weather,' remarked Alexander.

He satisfied himself by staring over the wicket at the little horse grazing peacefully by the woodside. As he rejoined the girl he tried to walk slowly and naturally, without eagerness and without excitement. Nevertheless, he was conscious of being filled and overcome by a sensation which in its novelty and wonder seemed to deprive him of something with every step he took with the girl deeper into the garden. And in place of what he lost came a host of strange, unbelievable emotions of which hitherto he had suspected nothing, a sense of pleasure which filled his mind like a sweet smell.

It was a long garden, with not many flowers, but a great number of fruit trees set very thick and close, so that they appeared to be strangling each other. White beehives stood here and there in open spaces. Under the trees the same hot, overpowering stillness as ever stifled everything. All the time Alexander longed to make some sensible or amusing remark to the girl, who walked a little ahead of him, bumping the empty basket softly on her knees at each step, but something prevented him, and he became entranced merely by watching her.

He walked behind her as if dreaming. Presently the path turned to the right, and he caught a faint, brackish odour of water and saw a small pond.

The water was shallow and dingy-looking, the surface sprinkled with countless little yellow sloe leaves and the edge fringed with coarse grasses. When the girl ran on, however,

ALEXANDER

and reached the far side, it seemed to Alexander as clear as a mirror, reflecting her white figure with strange purity, and he felt an odd desire to jump across the pond in a very romantic fashion and land at her feet.

But suddenly the girl called:

'Can you climb trees?'

How best to answer this he did not know. But after a second he said:

'What trees are there to climb?'

'Only the sloe tree!' she cried.

She ran towards a large sloe bush overhanging the pond. Climbing trees was an accomplishment of Alexander's, but the sloe bush seemed to him dense, prickly and not quite assailable.

'Do you think the sloes are quite ripe?' he remarked in a hesitant voice.

'Don't you want to climb?' the girl flashed out at once.

'Yes, of course.'

'Then shall I climb first or will you?' she asked, while he hesitated.

'Oh, you first, you go,' he said.

She immediately made a light spring and climbed easily and quickly to a fork in the trunk, and, squatting there, gave the tree a sudden violent shake which brought sloes pelting down on the grass, in the pond and on Alexander's head.

'Bite one, bite one!' she called in extreme excitement.

But Alexander only shook his head, and dropping into the grass, broke into a slow, almost diplomatic smile, without a word.

All this gave him confidence and he looked up at her light form. In these moments he forgot his uncle, the little horse and the journey which meant so much to him, and felt that his whole existence was bound up in the girl, who never ceased attracting him. Seeing her suddenly leave the tree and take a bound through the grass to his side overcame him with a strange faintness. When she sat down he tried at once to look as if interested in some object in the pond. His quick glance arrested her. She followed his gaze, a silence deepen-

ALEXANDER

ing and falling upon them immediately, a silence he found hard to endure again.

But he could say nothing. He half-closed his eyes against the brilliant sunshine. The thoughts he conceived were unbalanced and spasmodic and he could never work them out. An incredible length of time seemed to pass. . . . At last a pair of pigeons broke from just beyond the sloe bush, and flew over the house. The girl gazed up at them. In a flash, his heart clamouring in his throat, he turned and looked at her face, upturned to the sunshine, her bright hair and her long sunburnt neck uncovered almost to the delicate bosom having its source in a little shadow. He was carried utterly away. It seemed to him that he must lie flat on his face, without speaking or moving, lest he should choke with joy.

'Pigeons . . .' Her voice floated off, tranquilly. Then in the distance rose suddenly a sound and Alexander imagined he heard voices.

They both sprang to their feet and began instinctively to walk in the direction of the house.

'I can hear my mother,' said the girl.

He felt it would be somehow nice and courteous if he said:

'Is that your mother in the red blouse?'

'Yes . . . only that's not a blouse,' she answered in a rather deprecating tone. 'Are you going a long way?'

'I don't know how far it is.'

'What are all those baskets for?'

And feeling rather important, he answered:

'They're fruit-baskets. Every one has to be filled before we come back again.'

But although he spoke in a very bold way his excitement never ceased.

When they reached the house his uncle, the girl's mother, and another woman with fair hair and a pale pink dress and a rather cheerful, pretty face, whom he had not seen before, all stood about a well, the woman peering into the well — while his uncle turned the windlass. As he approached the bucket rose, swaying and spilling water.

He stood still and watched, trying to assume a very careless

ALEXANDER

appearance, as if nothing had happened and he had never moved from that spot.

Then, rather than have his presence noticed with surprise, he said:

‘Are you going to start?’

The two women and his uncle turned sharply and looked at him.

‘Where in thunder have you sprung from?’

‘He’s been after the plums . . . that’s it. I’ll be bound that’s about the drift . . .’ and such remarks came from the smiling women.

He only broke into the same slow, almost diplomatic smile as before, without a word.

When he turned the girl had vanished. He felt at once a sickening sensation and a desire, regardless of what his uncle and the women might say, to run and look for her. Uncle Bishop and the two women made off in the direction of the wicket, taking the water for the little horse. Casting hurried glances about him, but without reward, he sauntered after them.

While the horse was drinking, the woman in the pink dress, whom he rather liked, said in such a way that it was difficult to understand if she referred to him or to the horse:

‘Would he like a curd tart, do you think?’

Alexander did not answer. The horse ceased drinking. Suddenly his uncle bellowed in a stentorian voice in his ear:

‘Do you hear? Would you like a curd tart?’

‘Please,’ said Alexander at once, starting.

‘Well then, fathead, listen! Go along with you.’

Alexander followed the pink dress. All the time he was conscious of a vagueness, an unreality in everything. As he stood in the kitchen waiting for the woman to return with the tart he darted glances this way and that, in pursuit of the vanished girl, and even took three steps towards the other door, thinking himself alone, in order to search further for her.

Again a sound startled him. Glancing round, he found himself for the second time face to face with the old, dried-up woman. This time her eyes, wide open, looked ~~to~~ him like

ALEXANDER

two black balls of peppermint. They stared horribly, and all of her little black figure huddled soundlessly in the corner seemed to him sinister in its watchfulness and lack of life.

He felt hypnotized and yet revolted, and dared not move until the woman in the pink dress returned. And then he turned away quickly, eating with difficulty and conscious of a lump in his throat.

'Perhaps you'll remember me to your mother,' the woman said behind him. 'Say you saw Cilla . . . just Cilla. Then she'll know. Don't you forget.'

He made an obedient murmur, and cast a last hasty glance into the garden, hotter and stiller it seemed than ever. But nothing stirred, nothing broke the stillness there.

He climbed into the cart and sat motionless. Uncle Bishop looked at his watch and said, 'God bless me!' four or five times over, and after climbing into the cart too, he began to say farewell.

'Good day, good day,' he kept repeating. 'You ought to rub Pollyanna's legs every day with hounds-tongue ointment, three or four times. Tell her they're Bishop's very words, and she knows I'm right. You can't go wrong with hounds-tongue, it's a cure-all. What? . . . Doctors? . . . They might as well be in Bedlam, with the poor thing's legs rotting off with pain. What's that? Ha, ha! God bless me, that's a fact!' he burst out, trying to give the girl's mother a playful poke with the whip. 'You're fat enough, too, and no mistake, but I remember what my mother said about you the day you were married. There's no flesh on her, she says, she's got neither bosom nor backside. They're nothing but little apples.'

The women laughed and Uncle Bishop, in great spirits, suddenly began to shout a great many indiscreet things, saying farewell over and over again, alternately flicking the little horse and reining it tight again.

They began to move off at last. Alexander tried to smile. The wheels turned, a little faster every second. He was overcome by a sensation of being dragged somewhere against his will.

ALEXANDER

Then all at once, in a most subtle way, he was aware that the girl was watching him. He felt this as certainly as if she had held her finger-tips very close to his cheek. He turned impulsively, and beheld her with her chin resting on her hands and her hands resting on the top of the little gate, staring at him. The blood rushed to his cheeks, and filled with all his former joy, he kept turning and seeing her in that same careless, lovely watchful pose, while the cart drew steadily farther and farther away.

Finally he saw her no more. The house, the goat, the hens and at last the wood itself slipped into the distance. An unfamiliar, beautiful valley unfolded itself before his gaze. The dew had vanished and there was a hard brilliance about the sky as if it were a gem.

A clock chimed eleven. Uncle Bishop's breath smelt sweetly of wine. Alexander fixed his eyes on the distance, hardly knowing what he did, dreaming endlessly.

II

When they had driven a little longer the road made a sudden curve like a sickle, and while his thoughts were still of the girl and all that had taken place in the wood, a square stone house standing alone among dark clumps of trees came suddenly into sight. All other thoughts momentarily at an end, he gazed and asked:

'Is this where she lives?'

'Hold hard,' said his uncle. 'You'll see her if you wait a moment. Go along with you and open the gate. Hullo! the damned dogs already! Go along and don't be frightened.'

As Alexander alighted and began to push back the massive iron gates a furious chorus of barking dogs greeted him, and suddenly six or seven bitches, all of the same black-and-brown breed and each very corpulent, rushed out at him from nowhere, yelping and snapping about his heels and striking terror into him. He hated dogs, and standing stock-still, cast

ALEXANDER

one despairing look at his uncle, who at once leapt up like a fat old jack-in-the-box and began wildly brandishing his whip and shouting:

‘Damn the dogs, get back! Damn the dogs!’

He jerked the reins excitedly. ‘Get out, you scallywags!’ he shouted afresh as the cart moved forward. ‘God bless me, what does a woman want with seven dogs? Get back!’

The cart drove in and the yelping bitches were scattered in all directions. Partly to protect himself, and partly to show that he was not wholly afraid, Alexander seized the little horse’s bridle and led it towards the house. Green lawns and a superb orchard lay before him. His gaze fell fascinated on scores and scores of trees stretching infinitely ahead.

Suddenly his uncle whispered a little excitedly:

‘There’s the old tit herself, yes, there she is. Coming towards us. See her?’

And looking up, Alexander saw approaching him a small, frail woman in black, wearing a snuff-brown bonnet and carrying a silver-knobbed walking stick in her hands. She looked as if got up to match her dogs, who all instantly ceased barking and waddled towards her in a curious apathetic way, snuffing about her skirts. She walked as though on ice, hardly progressing at all, with her head and hands quivering in agitation, as if for ever dispatching little signals of terror and distress. Behind her came a white cat and yet another dog, an aged, weary creature who moved even more slowly than its mistress.

His uncle began to hobble across the lawn to meet her, muttering again, ‘The old tit, the old tit!’ at every step he took.

When he reached the old lady he formed an enormous trumpet with his hands, and bellowed into her ears like thunder:

‘Glad to see you. Nice weather, God bless me. Not very lucky with the dogs again, I see.’

A little plaintive voice piped out, hardly audible, in reply:

‘So you’ve come. No, no . . . it’s awful. What with the

ALEXANDER

boys stealing the fruit, and then the dogs having litters all the time . . . The boys have broken the wall again. It's dreadful. I don't know what to do, people rob me right and left. What's it coming to?"

She turned her doleful, shaking head first to the garden, then to the dogs, half of which were heavy with puppies, and lastly to Uncle Bishop.

'Damn brutes!' he began. 'Not the dogs, I've nothing against dogs. The boys I mean . . . Not the dogs. Why don't you do something?'

'What can I do?'

'Say your prayers . . .' muttered Uncle Bishop in an undertone. 'The old tit. Say your prayers.'

'Wha-a-at? . . . Whose boy is that?'

'My nephew; Fanny's boy. Alexander, come and shake hands. He's twelve. Strong lad, isn't he?' he bellowed.

And Alexander, trying to bear out this statement, yet afraid of hurting the old woman, shook hands, and her hand seemed to him like a piece of cold fish and her eyes seemed ready to stream with tears as she looked at him.

'Would he like a piece of cake, do you think?' she said.

Alexander, not daring to refuse, although again not hungry, at once said 'Please.'

'Please!' repeated his uncle in a staggering voice.

Nodding and quaking, the old lady turned and slowly retreated, all the dogs following her like mourners at a funeral. While she had gone Uncle Bishop gave the little horse its nose-bag and Alexander unpacked the fruit-baskets and set them on the grass.

After a long interval the procession returned. Alexander's uncle at once began a secretive whisper:

'She's rich, the old teaser. Her husband invented a patent candlestick and made a fortune, but he broke his neck on horseback. She had a son, but he's a lunatic and no one knows where he is, and so it's all hers, all the blessed money and this orchard, everything. Fetch the piece of cake, fetch it, fetch it — be on the right side of her, my boy, go along, fetch it.'

ALEXANDER

Alexander was forced to go and take from the old lady's quivering fingers a large triangle of bright yellow cake, which looked distasteful and sickly.

'It's saffron cake,' she said to him, in a trembling little voice.

What saffron cake was he did not know, but he tried to look as if he did know and as if he were very grateful. Then his uncle and the old woman began to discuss the fruit-gathering and he was left unnoticed, feeling awkward as he lingered about with the cake he did not want.

'The little golden plums on the bank are ripe, two trees of them,' he heard her say. 'Get them . . . get them all. The boys and the wasps are after them. And then there's a tree of pearmains: that's loaded, and there'll be none left if you leave them. Pears, there's two trees of pears, the big early ones at the end of the garden, and the little sweet pears. You know where they are. There's a ladder stands by the wall. You know where everything is, don't you? It's a poor year. Some of the trees are blighted, but you do as you think fit.'

'You know you can trust us,' bellowed Uncle Bishop. 'You know that you always have trusted us.'

'Yes, I trust you.'

But while they were taking hooks and baskets and all the time they were walking down the long avenue of apples into the depths of the garden, Alexander was conscious of her eyes pursuing all their movements, as if she did not trust them. Her eyes reminded him of gooseberries, and he also felt that though she was so very deaf this deafness did not matter, since her sight was so uncanny and remarkable. And as he turned and shot a last furtive look along the avenue all the seven dogs and the white cat appeared to be watching him too.

'It's a garden, if you like, isn't it?' his old uncle kept whispering, as though the intricacy of the avenues and the never-ending branches stooping under a weight of red, yellow and green globes awed him. 'There's a peach, on the wall, and next to it's an apricot, but there's never a finger

allowed on them, the old tit, not a finger. Don't you touch them, do you hear that? Eat what you like and fill your pockets, but she'll know almost if you look on that wall. God bless me if she won't.'

But Alexander, so much attracted by the garden, scarcely listened. Everywhere heavily laden trees stood, and as in the little garden in the wood, not a breath or leaf stirred itself, and the sunshine seemed to burn the stillness and came through the leaves with a soft liquid light. In odd places under the trees there were vegetable marrows, which he thought looked like fat sucking pigs asleep in the sunshine. In the distance some pigeons were cooing, and a flock of starlings flew up from an apple tree and soared away like black dust. They walked on and on. 'Did you ever see the like?' the old man kept saying. And then suddenly they came to a point where this level, tranquil order of things changed, and the garden dipped abruptly. They halted. Before them lay a kind of oval basin which it seemed to Alexander might have been a stone-pit in some bygone time. Here the trees hung from ledges and precipices and flourished in a toy green valley. 'Cunning,' he heard his uncle say. Very cunning and very wonderful indeed he thought it also as he stood there gazing with large eyes at the little golden plums in the grass, with a sensation as if the outer world had been left aside for ever.

'Get a basket. Let's begin,' said his uncle suddenly. 'The little yellow tree first of all.'

Alexander, rather dazed, took the basket in which lay the saffron cake, and though not hungry, he longed to taste the cake and the tempting, sweet-looking plums. And so he took first a bite at the strange-coloured cake and then at the fruit. The cake he concluded at once was poisonous, but the plums were like honey, and he went on eating them, hardly filling up the basket at all. And shortly, without fuss, and with an expression of sleepy indifference, he put some of the ripest plums in his pockets and dropped the saffron cake into long grass, like a stone.

As the work went on, Uncle Bishop at times murmured

in a cracked bass some old song Alexander had heard already a hundred times, but which possessed for him still the same enchantment and surprise, and at others related all he knew of some old murder, very cold-blooded and gruesome, telling it all so skilfully and with such cunning pauses that Alexander would cease all movement, and sit on a branch or stand in the grass as if paralysed, not breathing, wondering if the climax would ever come. At times they were very silent. In these pauses the boy wished only that he might lie still in the shady grass, to sleep, or to watch with sleepy eyes the rabbits feeding in the green hollow. But each time a curious sense of pride prevented his doing this. And conscientiously he went on filling and refilling his basket with plums.

When the plum tree had been stripped the man sighed, and as if for reward, ate the first plum Alexander had seen pass his lips, and blew out his cheeks and spat the stone to an extraordinary height in the air. Then he seized his jacket and opened his watch and looked at the sun.

'Oh! Lord,' he muttered, scratching himself. 'It's nearly one. Fetch the basket.'

A sudden feeling of joy and relief filled Alexander, who felt as if he had been locked in a room and released.

When he returned with the basket Uncle Bishop was already seated under a large pear tree, stropping a magnificent clasp-knife on his trousers-knee in readiness.

'What have they put in for us?' he kept saying. 'What? Cold pie? What sort of a pie? What? . . . Rabbit? Never! God bless my buttons, but it must be. It can't be pigeon. It must be the rabbit Ursula bought from the gypsy. And what else? Give me the pie. God bless me, it's heavy, it must have been a hare. What else, my son?'

'Potatoes, cold beans, bread . . . cheese,' recited Alexander, 'and here's another pie, a fruit pie, yes, that's fruit, and here's something else. Bottles.'

'Bottles?'

After saying this, his mouth remained open and Alexander saw a look of sly astonishment creep into his face. Then he stretched out his hands and took the bottles from Alexander

and slowly held them up to the sunshine, closing one eye deliberately. Presently he remarked:

'That's for you.'

'What is it?'

'Drink! Never mind what. Never ask what a drink is, it's not manners.'

And leaning backwards, Alexander drank slowly and deeply, scarcely tasting what he drank, but aware only of the satisfaction and coolness of drinking, until he felt as if the breath were being squeezed from his body and he could drink no longer. Suddenly, with a great burst for breath, he ceased and sat upright. His uncle was still drinking, with his head also thrown back, so that he looked to Alexander very like a man blowing a black trumpet from which no sound ever came. And as he watched, wondering how long this could last, the half-sweet, half-bitter taste of what he had drunk awoke in his mouth.

'Is yours herb beer too?' he leaned forward and asked.

His uncle did not answer, however, but suddenly smacking his lips and corking up the bottle, took his clasp-knife and cut the pie. Alexander received the leg of a rabbit, and immediately felt strangely important, as if he had been given a prize or had said something very witty and clever. He sat with his mouth open, staring.

'Eat, sonny, eat,' urged his uncle at once. 'There's beans too, and potatoes. Eat!' He waved his long arms about him to the trees and the sky. 'All the pears and the little red apples have to be gathered before we go, and it's a long journey.'

He himself cut two thick slices of bread and began to spear pieces of rabbit with the point of his knife, eating ravenously. A knife and fork had been packed up for the boy, but he felt it would be almost degrading and a little childish to use them, and rather furtively he took out a small tortoise-shell penknife and began spearing fragments of rabbit's flesh too. There was no time for conversation. And gradually everywhere grew silent. Hardly a bird spoke, and the thick wall of trees about them stood still and breathless.

The sun lay directly overhead and Alexander could see the heat shimmering in waves beyond the baskets lying in squares and rings of yellow in the grass.

Soon he felt his thoughts fly back again to all that had happened in the wood. The same overbearing silence, the same heat, the same uncanny sense of utter stillness, without a quiver or breath! The picturesque little house, the old woman sitting staring like death, with a comb clasped in her hands, the pond, the sloe tree, and most vivid of all, the flowerets on the young girl's dress reflected in the shining dark water! He ceased eating and the faint sickness and shock of unexpected joy obsessed him.

'Come, eat your leg, eat your leg, boy!'

He started and responded mechanically, lifting the rabbit-leg in his fingers, and then sank into thought again.

As he sat there, alternately eating and dreaming, he could only wonder what she was doing, where she could be?

'If you don't want the leg, don't waste it. Have a little of this pie instead. Look, see the crust.'

He took a slice of pie, which had been made with late raspberries, gooseberries, damsons and a sprinkling of dew-berries. As he ate he looked up and asked:

'That man in the little house over there, he's very ill, isn't he?'

'Yes, God bless him; he won't live, poor fellow.'

'Shall you go back to see him?'

'We might and we might not. I don't know,' he said, shaking his head, and the boy felt driven back to silence.

During the remainder of that meal he did not speak again; only his uncle's answer, 'We might and we might not,' careered repeatedly through his head, troubling him.

Not long later the man, with a sleepy 'Don't you fidget, my son,' stretched back on the grass and closed his eyes. In obedience the boy sat for some moments very still, feeling as if he were the only creature alive in the still, drowsy noonday.

He rose presently and walked idly away. . . . The house appeared, its white stone exterior looking forbidding in the

ALEXANDER

sunshine. He stood for some moments staring at it, and then turned abruptly down a little sloping path leading towards a group of firs. A grasshopper began chirring, and a low hum of wasps rose from the plum trees. Suddenly Alexander stared, slackened his pace, and then, gazing still harder at the object he saw under an apple tree just ahead, ceased walking altogether. Two small eyes like black beans returned his stare, and an intense sensation of guilt and nervousness refused to let him go forward or run away.

Before him sat a man, a very small person in a blue-striped shirt, a black cap and stone-coloured trousers fastened with a most handsome belt of plaited and twisted leather decorated with pieces of brass. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up, and on his right fore-arm a purple dragon had been tattooed and on his left there was a crimson bird, like a swallow, designed as if it were flying towards his shoulder. Alexander could not surmise if this man were old or young. He only felt that his thin face with its sharp nose, black little eyes and bony forehead was very, very cunning. And after a long silence, during which the eyes never flickered, he said falteringly in an apologetic voice:

‘We’re picking the fruit.’

‘What’s your name?’ asked the man, with a very cunning squint and in a sharp arresting voice.

‘I’m Mr. Bishop’s nephew.’

The man thought a minute, then asked: ‘Did you come in that cart with that little nag?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that’s all about of a nag, that is. I wouldn’t be seen dead with a nag like it. It’s a midget!’ he went on derisively. ‘Don’t you feed it?’

Alexander, who was devoted to the little horse, was too outraged to speak, and only nodded several times, staring at the other’s thin, cunning face until he detested it. And then suddenly the man remarked:

‘I’ve got a boy about your clip. How old are you?’

‘Twelve,’ said Alexander.

‘Yes, he’s about that. Perhaps he’s older, though. I don’t

know, it's a job to tell.' And he informed Alexander abruptly: 'I've got fourteen children; you would believe that perhaps, would you?'

'Yes,' said Alexander at once, though he felt he couldn't believe a word.

'He was the first to be born after I came home from Turkey, he was. Seven came before Turkey, and seven after, and there's no doubt the first are the strongest. There's no doubt they are. Fine, strong women and men all of them, and two with children of their own. Only yesterday my eldest came to see me. He's with a duke — yes, he's a duke's servant — a duke with a name as long as your legs. I can't pronounce his name, no more could you. And this duke says to him, "Baxter," he says, "if there's any mortal thing you want while I'm away from home, you take it. Take it!" He was drunk — he drinks a lot, this duke — but it didn't matter, and no sooner's his back's turned than Wag — that's my son — orders another servant to kill a turkey and gets a leg of mutton and a little barrel of beer, besides a lot of waistcoats and a pair of gaiters — doeskin gaiters, mark you — gentlefolk don't know what they have got, they don't wear things out — and a pair of pants worn once and never a second more, and shoes and God knows what besides he didn't get — and I'll slit my throat if he didn't hire a conveyance and bring them home and say to me, "Dad, what with having fourteen of us and times hard, you could do with the Duke's trousers!" Oh! my God, I laughed till the tears rolled down my cheeks. Why I laughed I don't know, but there you are, he's my son, and he's a chip off the old block, and I'm proud of him. And money! Before he goes he says to me, "Dad, here's a quid," and he opens his pocket for me to look. And there they lay, hundreds of them, hundreds and hundreds of pounds like packs of playing cards, hundreds and hundreds. . . .'

During all this discourse Alexander grew more and more incredulous and yet more and more fascinated. He felt all the time that he was being told wonderful enormous lies. Everything he could do towards believing these lies he did,

ALEXANDER

yet the thought of so much money, so many children, and the look of constant craftiness on the man's face defeated him.

He stood as if spellbound.

'Haven't seen the old lady about, I suppose?' asked the man suddenly, completely closing one eye and squinting up at Alexander with the other.

The boy shook his head.

'Good,' remarked the other, and took out a small clay pipe, very stained and dirty. 'She's a tough customer. No smoking in this garden — perhaps you don't believe that? Well, believe it or not, it's true. She's afraid she'll be burnt in her bed. Her husband, when he was alive, did nothing but experiment and experiment with things all day and all night long. And one night he set the house afire. . . . That's the reason. "Baxter," she says every morning, "don't you dare strike a match." ' Just at this moment the man did strike a match and began smoking. 'She's like some little cheese-mouse, twittering and trembling about her money. Not like a man I worked for once. He had money. God strike me, he had some money! "Baxter," he used to say to me, "if you want a glass of beer there's a bucket." A bucket! And I used to draw a bucket of beer as you might draw a bucket of water for your little old nag. . . . But he killed himself. Money! That's what money did for that man. Money ain't no good. The old lady, what's all her money bring? What's she got? Her only son in an asylum, and nobody, not a soul, to live with her — all alone — might as well be under the ground.'

This time Alexander followed the discourse without a thought for its truth, only fascinated profoundly, and as the man went on to tell more and more fantastic episodes he crept nearer and at last sat down at his feet.

While listening he caught sight of an object lying partially concealed by the man's jacket. After some time he made out the fur, then the ears and whiskers of a dead rabbit. From its snout hung a globule of bright red.

'Did you catch that?' he asked, pointing at the dead animal.

'Not so loud. Did I catch what?' the man asked sharply,

and pretended suddenly to be extremely stupid, looking everywhere except where Alexander was pointing.

‘That!’ repeated the boy.

‘Where? What is it you’re after? What you mean — “catch”? There’s nothing but slugs to catch here.’

To judge from his puzzled, apathetic movements the man looked as if he had just woken up. Nothing of his slyness remained. And yet Alexander felt that under this mask of stupidity the cunning was growing deeper.

He became silent, and the man took advantage of the silence to relight his pipe, while Alexander, nonplussed by this last change of attitude, wondered if he dare ask another question. After a long silence he did ask it:

‘Do you live here?’ he said.

‘Over yonder, by the wood,’ said the man.

‘What’s your name?’ he ventured to ask, timidly.

‘Smack. . . .’

As he uttered this, his mouth snapped shut as sharply as a mouse-trap, and with a sound very like a smack. This produced a great effect on Alexander, who sat open-mouthed for some moments before daring to say:

‘Were you christened that?’

‘Christened? . . . Lord God, my mother ran off all of a sudden, feeling a bit of a pain in the fields one day, and delivered me under a haystack. I wasn’t christened.’

‘Don’t you go to church, either?’

His face screwed itself up with contempt.

‘Church?’ he said.

Alexander was impressed by this also, and would have been glad to say how he too hated church, and that he did not understand the psalms or the sermon and could never remember the responses, and how he agreed with his Uncle Bishop that it was all popery and humbug, but suddenly the man drew out a bottle from somewhere and took an immense drink, a drink so long that it seemed to the boy that the bottle must have been emptied over and over again. When it ended the man stretched himself, licked his lips several times, and said suddenly:

ALEXANDER

'You look as if you've never seen a man drink. Why, my dad, if he were alive, poor old devil that I should ever say so, he'd tell you how he used to drink ten pints of a morning, mowing grass. . . .' He squinted and nodded with all his cunning, and then got nimbly to his feet.

Something at frequent intervals had been troubling Alexander, and now as the man prepared to leave him he felt an overwhelming desire to ask another question. And almost against his will he said:

'Do you know the people over there in the wood?'

'Which wood?' said the man.

'There's a little house,' began Alexander, and suddenly he felt a strange ache as he visualized it all, 'you can hardly see it, the trees are so thick. There's an old woman there and someone used to live there named Pollyana, only she's married and bedridden now, because of her legs. And there's an old man — he's had an operation. It's over there, not very far. We passed it as we came this morning.'

All through this the boy's voice trembled and there lurked in his mind a picture of the young girl. Overcome by a suspicion that every word he spoke must reveal his inner feelings he began to stammer also. Anxiety and joy set up a conflict within him.

'In the wood, you say? The wood . . . but which wood?' said the man. 'There's so many woods.'

'Over there,' said Alexander, almost desperately.

'No, I can't say. Lord Almighty, there's a good many people I don't know — thousands!'

Suddenly he cocked his eyes for the last time at Alexander, and walking very sharp like a sharp little dog down the narrow path, passed from sight.

When Alexander returned to the high bank overlooking the disused stone-pit his Uncle Bishop was stretching himself after his sleep.

'Cover the plums with a sack or two,' he began saying. 'That's it, that's it. The basket we'd better take down with us. Drink before you put the bottle away, drink, drink!'

'Where are we going?' asked the boy after drinking some herb beer.

'You take the baskets while I bring the ladder. Make straight for the big pear tree. Straight on, you couldn't miss it.'

Under an immense pear tree, on which the fruit hung almost like ropes of onions, the boy presently set down the baskets. A thick, angry hum of wasps met him, and some birds flew up with startled cries from among the branches. Half-rotted pears lay about in the grass under the tree, bored by wasps and pecked at by birds, and a faint odour of what he thought was like wine or balm met him as he walked round and round the tree, crushing pears with his boots and disturbing wasps in his anxiety to find a pear to taste.

'Try one, try one,' suddenly urged his uncle, who had come up behind, a little breathless, with the ladder.

Gaining courage from this, Alexander snatched a fine yellow pear from the tree and crushed his teeth into its unblemished skin. For ever afterwards a recollection of the rare flavour, the strange, wine-like odour and honeyed juice of this pear remained with him. His uncle had seized a pear also and was sucking it with quick gasps of pleasure. Even more excited than Alexander about the fruit he kept opening his eyes extremely wide, until they shone like blue glass marbles.

Neither the man nor the boy for some time uttered a word. At last Uncle Bishop said:

'You must put a few in a bag for yourself. Not yet, later on. And don't let the old tit see you do it.'

Alexander neither did nor said anything in answer to this, but remained spellbound for some moments under a sudden notion which had flashed into his head.

And throughout the afternoon this same idea of taking something, perhaps a plum or pear, as a gift to the girl never ceased to attract and trouble him. Screened by the thick leaves from view, he would sometimes gather a pear, rub it to a polish on his shirt and put it aside very religiously and tenderly. If, however, a bruise or crack appeared, he would

drop it, feeling a sense of acute loss, into the basket. The afternoon slipped by. Once as he was gathering a pear from a high branch he heard a rustling in the grass beneath him. He started and looked down to see four or five dogs snuffing about the baskets. He heard the old woman coming, too. Her snail-like approach and the remembrance of her keen sight made it agonizing for him to sit in the tree without movement or sound.

Then she carried on a conversation with his uncle which seemed to him to go on and on, everlastingly.

'Oh! the wasps, you see the destruction they cause,' she wailed. 'The fruit all eaten away! If it goes on like this I shall have nothing. Dear, dear, just look at it. Just look. It drives me out of my mind to think about it. What shall I do? Come away, Pretty, come away, naughty creature. There's nothing for you. Oh! dear, dear. If it weren't for the labour I'd have all the trees down, I'd have them all down tomorrow and there'd be an end of it all.'

All her troubles and griefs had to be poured into Uncle Bishop's ear. Over and over again she complained and sighed, until Alexander felt that he must drop off the branch with exhaustion and suspense.

Worst of all, she at last looked round and asked in a quaking, suspicious voice:

'Where's the little boy?'

'Oh! he's gone off,' bellowed Uncle Bishop. 'Lord knows where, but he's not far away. Down among the rabbits, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Look after him,' she implored. 'Don't let him touch them. I wouldn't have them touched, not for anything. No one's ever killed one, and no one ever shall, I can't bear it.'

'They'll eat you out of your bed before very long!' muttered Uncle Bishop brutally, not loud enough for her to hear.

'Don't let him touch them, don't let him touch them,' was all she said.

A moment later she had begun to shuffle away, all the dogs trailing in a waddling, abject string behind her skirts.

ALEXANDER

A long time elapsed before she passed out of sight and the boy had courage to move again. When he descended at last and looked about him it seemed as if the sun were already lower in the sky.

III

When evening began to come on at last, Alexander and his uncle carried back to the house all the fruit they had gathered, and under the supervision of the old lady, who stood tottering a little distance off, weighed and measured it, Alexander writing down the figures with extreme care on a sheet of paper. All the dogs and the white cat were also there, staring like wooden things or dragging themselves about the grass on their bellies, never running or barking. The little horse seemed to have grown impatient and stood restlessly stamping and frisking against the evening flies. The boy shared this impatience, fixing his mind constantly on the time when they must pass through the wood, longing desperately to depart.

‘Does the little boy understand figures?’ the old lady wanted to know. ‘He won’t make mistakes?’

‘Bless you, he goes to school!’ shouted Uncle Bishop, with pride and force. ‘What he doesn’t know isn’t worth knowing. Nowadays things are different. They’re taught everything, every mortal thing you can wish. Why, he learns Latin now — Latin! God bless your heart, he could write all the names of these apples and pears down for you in Latin.’

‘What good would that do?’

‘A good deal, you bet your life, a good deal. The boy wouldn’t do it for nothing. He’s got a head on him — you see for yourself. Turn round, my boy. There, you can see now — his head’s as big as a pumpkin.’

Uncle Bishop never lost an opportunity of showing how proud he was of Alexander, and to complete the force of this pride he often exaggerated and frequently told lies. And as he turned round in order to display his head, Alexander felt extremely foolish and half-scowled in vexation. He longed

ALEXANDER

for his uncle to pay his accounts and ached for the sound of wheels again. But his uncle dallied a little longer, and patting the boy's head, at last said to him:

'Now, you go over and show the lady what you've written. Go along.'

Alexander held out the paper in silence.

'I see, I see,' she said, squinting and trembling more than ever. 'Good lad, he writes well.' And for a long time he had to stand at her side, writing down all the figures his uncle shouted, vexed and uneasy. During this time he discovered that a strange smell hung about her, compound of preserved cloth, dogs, camphor, horse-beans and something dry and musty. And so much fruit had to be weighed and accounted for that he felt at last as if he had breathed this queer odour all his life.

The sun had plunged behind the largest tree before his uncle and the old woman vanished into the house to settle the accounts. All the dogs disappearing also, he was left alone and sat on a little wooden bench with great relief, wondering what time it could be and how soon a start would be made. Then shortly his face assumed an intense, meditative expression.

'Shall I get the apricot?' he thought. 'Could I go back into the garden without being seen?'

And presently, followed by the indistinct voices of his uncle and the old woman, he edged away and strolled in an indifferent manner down the path under the trees. His heart seemed to swell, beating with ponderous thumps. All things were flagged and hushed. An army of shadows advanced to meet him. His footsteps awoke echoes infinitely, making him turn round in fear, as if other footsteps were following him. Mysterious objects under the trees made him start and hasten too.

Suddenly he became aware of footsteps coming not from behind, but before. His impulse was to turn and run, but for some strange reason he ceased walking.

Then a figure appeared. It was Smack. Approaching very slowly, he began to say as soon as he saw Alexander:

ALEXANDER

'Oh, it's you, it's you, is it? God strike me, it looked like the old woman.' The boy remained dumb, simply gazing at the sack of either apples or potatoes that the man was carrying.

'You're like my son Squint, you are,' Smack went on, 'he creeps about on hands and knees and gets atop of you before you hear a sound. Why, I've seen him drop on a hare like you might drop on a beetle. Perhaps you wouldn't believe that? Well, believe it or not, but there it is. He's a miracle. . . . "Squint," I says to him one day, "you can drop on hares, but could you drop on a fox?" He looks at me and says "Could I drop on a fox?" — just like that. That's all. He's like that. But next day there was a meet. Full cry they came across from these woods, all the pinks and the ladies thinking they would be in at the kill, and the dogs running like mad. I was there, with Squint, behind a hedge. All of a sudden there's a gallows of a row, and God bless my poor old mother, the fox walked through the hedge. Dainty! I never saw a wedding where there was anything so dainty. And there she stood. She never moved. She just looked at Squint, and Squint — what did he do? God strike me, but he dropped on her, he dropped on her. And when the hunt came up, there he stood, there stood our Squint with his arms round the fox's neck.'

And once again Alexander was carried away by the cunning of it all. Almost hypnotized by nods and winks he did not know what to say. But suddenly Smack asked him sharply:

'Where's the old woman, eh?'

'She's in the house, settling the accounts up,' stammered Alexander.

'In the house, eh?'

'They've just gone in.' And abruptly he gathered courage to ask: 'You didn't remember the name of the people in the wood, did you, after all?'

'Name of the people in the wood?'

'There's an old man, and two women who . . . ' began the boy.

But Smack shook his head, this time almost sorrowfully,

ALEXANDER

as if he hated not being able to conjure up some answer.

'Perhaps I know them,' he said at last. 'There's thousands of people I do know, thousands. I dare say I know them.'

'There's a girl,' persisted Alexander.

'A girl?' the other repeated. 'A girl?' And suddenly he managed to attach to that word something incredulous, cynical, mocking, and his thin lips and eyes squeezed themselves into a repellent smile.

Directly afterwards he laughed and sidled off, and Alexander found himself walking rapidly towards the wall bearing the apricot trees, no longer afraid, but driven by a feeling of desperation and wretchedness. All his sweetest, most tender emotions felt wounded. It seemed to him monstrous that what aroused in him elation and joy should have struck Smack as contemptible and petty. He did not understand and felt that it was all horrible, that in some strange way he had betrayed a mysterious and precious trust. Only the intensity of his own beliefs comforted him.

He hurried on. He resolved suddenly to snatch the apricot quickly, and, regardless of everything, run as fast as possible back to the house again.

In the dying sunlight the apricot trees had a rich, luxuriant, exclusive look about them. On the third tree hung a very special apricot he had noted several times. He plucked it, quickly and gently, and began to run.

He emerged from among the trees just in time to hear the voice of his uncle begin impatiently shouting:

'Where are you? Where are you? Boy! Where have you been? Here, here . . . Tell us what ninety-three pence make. Ninety-three pence . . . what? Come here, you'd better come inside. Take your cap off. And remember if the old tit asks you anything shout in her ear. Shout! Now make haste, go along the passage.'

Alexander was hurried into a gloomy passage, where he noted a strong odour of damp and mice and saw several pairs of antlers branched from the walls and a stuffed white owl staring down at him. When at a furtive whisper from his uncle he entered a door on the right, he saw the old lady,

now with spectacles on, sitting alone at a shining oval table. A good deal of money, with three or four dark red leather bags and heaps of bills were strewn about. Again the odour of damp and mice met him. All the furniture was of pale yellow wood, with faded blue damask upholstery and many cushions. Little pairs of milky green and pink glass vases stood on a white mantelpiece, like small dolls preening themselves in the large mirror behind. Something dead, old-fashioned and sad lurked about the room, and to the boy it seemed full of memories, of the lingering presences of men and women who had once lived, talked and perhaps sung and danced there. He noticed that the walls were covered with old portraits, every other portrait looking like a picture of the Saviour, except that all the figures were wearing bowler hats and deerstalkers and white silk neck-ties.

'Go in, go in,' urged his uncle, giving him little impatient punches from behind.

He advanced and stood silently before the table, staring at the heaps of money.

Suddenly his uncle began to say at the top of his voice:

'Here's the boy. He'll manage it. It'll be put right before you can wink.'

The old lady turned and searched Alexander's face with sharp squints. 'Mind you do, and don't make mistakes,' she said.

'That's all right, you trust him,' bawled his uncle. 'Now, my son, tell the lady what ninety-three pence are.'

Alexander, a little bewildered, had to think a moment before replying. 'Seven and ninepence,' he said at last.

'Shout!'

'Seven and ninepence,' he shouted.

'Seven and ninepence?' she repeated. 'Are you sure? You haven't made a mistake, have you? If you think you haven't made a mistake, write it down . . . just there . . . write it down.'

Alexander took from her shaking fingers a small black pen, with which he wrote down the figures seven and nine with laborious care in an old, dirty book. As he wrote, her stiff

ALEXANDER

sleeves brushed against him and he was continually afraid that she would feel or smell or in some other way divine that he had the apricot about him. All the little tremors and starts of her body alarmed him.

'Has he written it?' She croaked suspiciously after a silence. 'I can't see.'

'Yes, he's written it!' proclaimed his uncle. 'You can trust him. What you want is a light.' Twilight was rapidly creeping through the room. 'You're not likely to see. Haven't you got some sort of a lamp?' he asked.

'Wha-a-t?'

'A lamp! You want some sort of a light on the subject or else you won't know shillings from ha'pence.'

'What does he say?' she turned and asked Alexander in a puzzled voice.

But this was never answered, for suddenly his Uncle Bishop snatched out his matches and struck a light, letting it flare up in his fingers. The old woman stood at once petrified, all her features white and stiff with horror. Then she began to struggle, as if choking, her eyes bulged, her hands waved hither and thither, she tried to stand up, her head looked as if it must totter off with rage, and then at last she croaked out in a terrible voice:

'What are you doing, what are you doing? Put it out at once! Oh! you wicked man, you wicked man! You mustn't do it, I won't have it! Put it out at once!'

Her voice was thin and rasping. 'Put it out, you wicked man! Put it out!' she kept saying in fury.

Uncle Bishop's mouth fell open, and without a word he pinched out the flame with his fingers. There was silence. The boy dared not stir.

Then the old lady began another struggle: she tried to calm herself, to sit down, to administer reprimands, but only infuriated trembling went on accompanied by a strange half-hissing, half-rattling sound. Gradually she coiled herself up, trembling less and less, like a spring, until she sank into the chair again. As she became quieter the silence seemed to become more and more intense. A little smoke

wandered through the air and the pungent odour of it spread about the room. But the boy hardly dared to look or smell.

After what seemed an interminable silence, the old woman held up one finger and shook it admonishingly at Uncle Bishop for a long time. 'You must never do that,' she said. 'I never allow that — I never allow a naked light, not even in the garden, not anywhere. Did you want to frighten my life out?'

'Let me pay you what I owe. That's enough. God damn it, what next, what else?' he muttered. 'Let me pay you.'

'You might have been the death of me!' she quavered.

He did not heed, however, and began to shout with increased impatience:

'Never mind that, let's pay you and be off; we shall have dark on us.'

Still she remained unenlightened, muttering constantly about life, fire and death, until the man mustered suddenly a thunderous shout:

'Let me pay you, do you hear, let me pay you!'

When she heard at last, there was a change in her demeanour. After an abrupt jerk of her head towards the table and a rapid fluttering of her hands about the bills and leather money-bags, an excited, almost skilful motion, as if she were working on a lace-pillow, she suddenly looked up at Alexander almost gratefully and asked him to add up a little column of figures.

'Add them carefully,' she warned him, however. 'Be very careful, your uncle's money isn't to be thrown away.'

'Never mind her. Add them up quickly,' urged his uncle. 'She's scared out of her life because we might cheat her. But it's all right, never mind, you just tell her what it amounts to.'

'Three pounds, seven and a penny,' said Alexander after a feverish interval.

'Tell her. Shout!'

Urged on by his uncle, he found something delightful in shouting, deliberately:

'Three pounds, seven shillings and a penny,' several times over.

ALEXANDER

His uncle began to count out the money, the woman nodding her head with a sort of feverish anticipation. When the three notes, the silver and the odd penny were being passed across the table, he kept shouting:

‘Are you satisfied? Are you satisfied?’

‘If you are,’ she said. ‘I am if you are.’

‘Thank God for that!’

‘Shall I get the reins untied?’ asked Alexander.

‘Yes, off you go! I’ll be there before very long!’

As he left the room and hurried along the gloomy passage he was overcome by a sense of great relief, followed by elation. Reaching the yard, he heard a sound and turned to see all the seven fat dogs following him. He clapped his hands loudly, hastening them into retreat. He felt he was sick of dogs, money, the dark house and the rasping voice and ever-quivering head and fingers of the old woman. He touched the apricot in his pocket repeatedly, feeling very happy. Aroused by his approach, the little horse began to show signs of joy too, stamping one foot, tossing its head and tinkling the harness. Alexander stroked the horse’s nose and then untied the reins and climbed into the cart.

Five minutes later all was ready. Surrounded by the seven dogs, who crawled about like huge beetles in the approaching twilight, the old woman muttered a few departing words:

‘You must come again,’ she said, and it almost seemed as if she regretted their departure. ‘It’s a bad year, and there’s no peace from the boys, but there’s a few black plums, and if anyone does have them it shall be you. They’re very good. Shall I expect you?’

‘Yes, you can expect us!’ shouted the man, impatient to flick the whip.

‘Here, little one,’ she then said.

And into the boy’s outstretched hands she reached up and put first a small apple, on which already birds had been feeding, then a piece of cake, this time made with fruit and baked very hard, and lastly a penny. Then she looked up at him softly and said:

‘God bless you.’

ALEXANDER

And these words seemed to transport him into a rare, trance-like frame of mind, so that he was hardly conscious of her face, the grey house and the seven stupid faces of the dogs slipping gradually away from him, and of the cart beginning to move forward smoothly and steadily into the summer twilight.

I V

They drove forward at an even more leisurely pace than that of the morning. Frequently the little horse walked, the man not using the whip except to flick the air. The baskets creaked under their great weight and the wheels made a monotonous grinding sound. Elsewhere the same tranquil, almost sleepy hush prevailed as in the early morning and at noon, and the same summer odours remained and the same sense of rich and lovely fruitfulness; only outlines and colours were changed; everything shaped itself by degrees of shadow and not light, and it seemed as if flowers and leaves were resting after intense toil, colourless and drooping, simply releasing breaths of heavy perfume.

Ever since morning the boy had been conscious of casting his thoughts forward to this time. Now, as he began to arrive near the fulfilment of them, he felt a desire to travel as swiftly as they had done. To sit still and not surge recklessly on at the pace of thought was an agony. And before long he could not resist asking:

‘Let me drive.’

‘You! It’s too dark. You sit still and eat the old tit’s cake.’

‘Shall we be long?’

‘We’re almost in the wood.’

There was something calm and reassuring about these words. He saw the dark belt of trees grow closer and vaster, as though it would reassure and protect him. The singing season was almost past, and owls and jays alone would call in the twilight, but there seemed to him something singing and jubilant in the silence and half-darkness, and gradually his mind filled itself with thoughts and images of a singing,

ALEXANDER

dream-like quality also. And so the distance was obscured, the fading sky retreated and solitary trees standing like dark ghosts seemed to creep away or dissolve where they stood, and nothing remained but the wood standing ready to receive them into its bosom. The little horse slowed to a walk, its feet padding the dust as softly as if shod with leather. The wheels scarcely turned. Nothing called, nothing seemed to happen . . . Alexander's hand crept to his pocket and closed about the apricot. And then, simultaneously, to the accompaniment of myriads of echoes rising like a confusion of voices, the wood closed about him, and the air he breathed became cooler, sharply sweet with a scent of damp leaves and of evening time and decay.

They drove on and on. Sounds became more numerous, and the wood seemed to be quivering with life. In the echoes of hoofs and wheels, in the stirring branches, in the rustle of invisible creatures over dead leaves, in passing moths, in the cries of birds, in his own breathing, there was something urgent and vital. Sounds seemed to run on before him, heralding his coming.

More and more, however, he became troubled by the thought that this coming might signify nothing. He was oppressed by uncertainty, and he dared not ask if they might stop in the wood.

All he dared to say, in a casual tone as if he had half-forgotten its existence, was:

'Isn't this where we stopped at a house?'

But there was no answer. He waited, and not daring to repeat his question, looked cautiously at his uncle's face, and seeing something passive and preoccupied about it, looked away quickly without a word, lapsing into a mood of half-painful, half-joyful expectancy.

He was astonished a moment later by feeling the cart suddenly come to a standstill. No house was visible, and he did not understand the reason of it all until his uncle climbed out and began striking matches for the lamps.

In order to relieve his wonder completely, he half-whispered, however:

‘What’s the matter?’

There was a low grunt in answer. Then, as he watched the lamplight swell into a soft circle in the surrounding darkness, he felt unresistingly borne upon him an image of the girl’s young, sweet face, filling him with an exuberance of happiness mingled with pain and longing, all the sublime emotion of first ecstasy transforming him, filling his soul with something so fresh, so joyous and amazing that he felt he could not have spoken or that he could scarcely have looked at her even had she suddenly appeared in the lamplight. He felt that he would suffer deeply if he never saw her again, knowing at last, and for the first time in his life, the meaning of suffering as he already knew the meaning of joy.

He was scarcely conscious of the cart moving forward again, the lamplight floating constantly before them like a yellow cloud, the air growing cooler under the trees. His mood of ecstasy resembled a tide, flowing in upon him wave after wave, and his thoughts became tangled and he gained only an impression of trees, very dark and monarchical, endlessly passing and passing.

A light appeared in the wood at last, and startled him abruptly from this mood of entrancement. He became alert and conscious of realities, sitting upright and tense. As he saw the light approaching and enlarging, he felt himself seized with sudden courage, and he said quickly and almost sharply, as if afraid his voice would break:

‘Are we going to stop here?’

‘Good Lord, what should we stop for?’ came the answer. ‘At this time of night? God bless me, we’ve nothing to stop for; we’ve long enough to go without that. What’s the matter? Eat the cake she gave you if you’re hungry. Fill your belly a bit. It’s a long way, my lad, out of the wood and through the valley. A long way yet.’

It seemed as if he did not listen to these words. He became aware of them instead as one becomes aware of a flock of birds flying from an horizon. The character of each word is lost in the whole as the individuality of each bird is lost

ALEXANDER

in the flock; only about their meaning, as of the species of bird, there remains no doubt. And he did not answer, feeling once again that he could not trust himself to speak, and also that perhaps he would have cried if he had begun to speak. A white moth flew past, and he felt that just as swiftly and irrevocably had the light of the house flown by before he could raise a hand to catch it. A great oak stumbled towards them like a malformed creature and lurched into darkness. All things retreated or moved endlessly on and on. Only he himself clinging to his precious thoughts, remained unmoving, not able to resist the wretchedness overpowering him.

Again the little horse fell into the same unbroken leisurely pace as in the early morning. Soon they passed out of the wood, reaching open fields under a calm deep-blue sky sown with stars. A smell of harvest would come, pass away, and be renewed, stronger and stronger.

His uncle began to murmur some old song, as he had done under the plum trees.

His wretchedness became complete, and his thoughts raced backward to the morning. With strange sharpness he saw the sunshine begin to beautify everything again, the golden, unfamiliar countryside, the harvesters, the distant woods, the dew clinging to the leaves — and at last the house, the hot, sweet garden, the unbroken stillness into which the girl had come like a vision, silently too.

The song went on. And to the boy it seemed that nothing so beautiful or memorable had ever taken place in his life, and as he recalled the moments by the pond, under the sloe tree, his unhappiness was mingled suddenly with an ecstatic joy. He felt that there was a strange sharp pleasure even in disappointment, even in the pain of not seeing her again.

The sleepy voice of his uncle sang drowsily on for long afterwards. Something in it alternately pained and fortified him. Then he would feel half-ashamed, half-foolish as he remembered all his secret thoughts, all his idealizing of the girl throughout the long day. Once he caught an image of her face, beautifully fresh and enchanting in all its detail, and

filled with an agony of bliss he asked himself over and over again:

‘Why didn’t we stop there? Shall I ever see her again? Will she remember me?’

When this mood, like all others, had exhausted itself, he passed into a long tranquillity. Familiar fields and trees appeared in the darkness, and the horse began travelling a little faster, as if sensing home. He brooded quietly now on the day that had passed, turning it over and over in his mind like some legend almost too wonderful to believe, mingling with it strange tales he had heard, things he had treasured up in his soul long, long ago, and he thought with special pleasure of the little house, the woman whose name was Cilla, the great fruit garden, the dogs, the little sharp man who had told him wonderful lies, and the old woman saying ‘God bless you’ as they drove away, his mind filling moment by moment with a mysterious elation and joy.

Soon they drove into a street by the river and so into a little yard. He saw the familiar sycamore tree, obscure sheds, low black stables, and then the house, throwing a stream of light on the tree.

At the sound of their approach a door opened, and there appeared first an old fat woman with a shawl over her head, then his aunt, a little shrewd, quick person who ran hither and thither like an ant, and lastly his mother, plump, rosy-faced and looking rather like a kind, soft-hearted nurse.

They began to pour out a stream of arguments and questions and to remonstrate severely with his uncle, who did not once reply.

‘Where have you been, what’s been happening to you? Oh! dear, keeping the boy out in that cart, I wonder you don’t die of shame. What’s been happening, Alexander? Aren’t you cold riding in the cart? I wonder he isn’t perished. Hot, did you say? Yes, in day-time I’ll own, but the dews are so heavy. It’s not sense — I’d be ashamed. Jump you down, my lamb. Lord, there’s dew on the cart, bless me if there isn’t. Jump you down and come indoors. Lord love us!’

To all this he said nothing. He felt that the three women,

ALEXANDER

particularly Ursula and even his mother, were being foolish. In the cart it had been peaceful and he had dreamed. Not to relinquish this peace or these dreams seemed everything to him. He turned slowly and walked away.

Ursula hobbled after him to the house. As he reached the door and she ushered him into the light she broke out again:

‘What happened, my lamb? Did you stop anywhere?’

He shook his head; a sharp feeling half of wretchedness, half of aching joy, swept over him; with difficulty he murmured: ‘No, we didn’t stop anywhere.’

With these words he heard the little horse walking away to its stable and the last tinkle of chains, and with the cry of an owl, with the closing of a door somewhere, with his uncle’s voice asking if all were locked for the night, he felt that the strange long eventfulness of the day was closing, was being shut away from him like a book. He sat motionless, not knowing whether to laugh or cry with overwhelming happiness and pain.

And suddenly, his heart very full, he felt that everything which had filled and beautified the day had at last slipped away into the past, and lay in his mind like a clearly remembered dream.

He could only sit silent in wonder. The day had passed, the journey was at an end.

When would another begin?

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

EVERY morning just after daybreak, Lanko, the quoits man, led out the white mare along with the other horses from the fair and watered her. She was a conspicuous figure, the only white horse in a long line of handsome greys, chestnuts, blacks and piebalds.

On Lanko's head there were white hairs, also, and in spite of his flashing dark eyes he was slow and steady when he walked. He and the mare never went too fast for each other, and he never grew impatient with her, but on the contrary understood her perfectly, trusting her to walk wherever he wished merely by a touch on her side. She in turn knew his touch unmistakably, for he had given it to her with the same unfailing gentleness and care for nearly fifteen years.

One morning, in order to be ready to depart with the rest, Lanko was in haste to return to the fair-ground. He was a little farther behind the other horses than usual. In the fair-ground itself, ever since before dawn, there had been commotion: the rattling of buckets, shrill voices, the jingle of harness, the heavy cough of great engines making their steam. Coming out of the gates, Lanko had had an argument with the 'Fat Lady' man, a trivial and foolish argument, but which nevertheless had aroused a spark of anger in his eyes and had thrown him behind the rest.

For the first time when taking the white mare to drink he felt impatient: in the chilly morning air, with the sounds of departure behind him and the clatter of hoofs in front, the distance to the drinking place seemed immense. He knew that the white mare did not understand this. Her pace did not once quicken, she did not notice the absence of her fellow-creatures. Yet he felt that because she had been understanding and obedient for nearly fifteen years she must understand now.

'We're late!' he told her. He slapped her ribs.

Her pace did not alter. After a moment Lanko ran a little in front of her and beckoned her, pulling the halter

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

gently. She seemed to recognize his presence, but without responding or increasing her pace even a little. He began to run at her side, slapping her ribs again, as if to encourage her to imitation. But she would not run, or disturb herself, or even turn her head.

Lanko began to grow puzzled. A little more than half way to the drinking place he saw the rest of the horses begin to return. This was an unprecedented thing: he had been there, day after day, for fifteen years with the rest. Now he would be forced to meet them return, would have to stand aside while the handsome, many-coloured crowd cantered past. In his mood of half-disappointment, half-consternation, he even desisted from urging the mare onward, and they fell into their habitual pace again, neither one too fast for the other, as if their patient and mutual understanding had suffered no break.

In a moment the long line of blacks and piebalds, roans and browns began to trot past him. He awoke from his mood of disappointment. He drew the white mare to the roadside, holding her there while the rest cantered disdainfully past, the men flaunting their arms, whistling and shouting, demanding what had become of him in a good-natured tirade which he could not understand. It seemed to him an hour before the mass of clattering hoofs filed past: he had not thought before that so many horses could come from the fair.

The last of the men, suddenly distasteful and aggravating to him in their red-and-check shirts, shouted: 'She's only a filly! — make her gallop — you'll never get away!' They turned on the bare backs of their horses and laughed at him.

Their reproaches stung him. With sudden anger he struck the mare's ribs again. It was a blow under which he had expected her to leap forward, as if startled by a shot. Instead she moved onward slowly, patient and steady, with habitual faith and obedience. Enraged by this, Lanko ran before and behind her, entreating, urging, beckoning her, pulling her halter, striking her ribs with even heavier blows than before,

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

but without ever inducing her to change her pace. He pulled at her head and glared into her eyes.

Like this he managed to get her to the drinking-pool at last, leading her down to the edge by the halter, pulling down her head until it touched the water. This was his every morning custom, a gesture of tender assistance, as towards a child. The white mare always responded, always drank her fill. But on this morning she only sniffed the water, gazed downward as if at her own reflection in the surface, then lifted her head and turned away.

Lanko was puzzled. The pool was muddy from the feet of the other horses, but he had seen her drink during fifteen years the foulest and most stagnant of waters. She too had suffered hardships. He patted her head in understanding of this. In a moment she would drink, he thought, if only he were patient, if only he waited.

For nearly a minute he was true to this resolve: he stood caressing the silk of her nostrils as he had so often done, humouring her, talking to her, full of patience for her. But she did not drink. All the time her head dropped a little towards the water, as if she were making up her mind, as if she were dreaming. The ripples her feet had made in the surface ran far away, grew faint, and then died — she remained so still.

‘Drink! for God’s sake! Drink, and let’s get away!’

His words were half-command, half-entreaty. But she did not move, though it seemed to him she must understand why he had brought her there, simply because for fifteen years, morning by morning, she had understood and obeyed.

Lanko grew desperate again. ‘Drink!’ He slapped her ribs. It was as if she were dead to all feeling — she did not respond, did not even quiver.

‘Drink, damn you, drink!’ he shouted suddenly. He pulled down her head to the water again, wetting her lips. Without even a mouthful she raised it again and turned away.

He led her to another part of the pool and repeated the gesture to which she had never failed to respond, suppressing momentarily all impatience and anger. But there, as before,

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

he drew from her only the response, as it seemed to him, of a stupid and stubborn will.

His anger grew uncontrollable — he wrenched the halter upward and from the bank dragged at the white mare's head until she followed him. 'If you won't drink you must go thirsty, damn you!'

Suddenly he thought: 'I shall be last. They'll be harnessed up and gone. I shall be crowded out.'

Again he shouted to the mare, threatening her.

The mare remained still, staring emptily ahead. Lanko turned and looked at her, and then, angered by this long succession of futile words, of unanswered gestures and tendernesses, strode forward and with his uplifted knee, kicked her in the ribs.

There was a pause. Then Lanko, though able to see how startled she was, how deeply she felt the blow, pushed her hind-quarters desperately. To his immense relief she responded and began to move off. But she seemed slower even than usual, heavier in the body: her feet touched the ground uncertainly, her head had drooped a little.

It began to be urged upon Lanko very slowly, in spite of his joy at seeing her move again, that his difficulties with her were not ended. Matters grew worse as he recalled the mornings when she had trotted back from drinking, when the longest journeys in summer had not seemed to tire her.

His anger abated a little and he walked at her side with all his old patience, exactly in time with her, patting her side gently in order to remind her of his presence.

Some caravans were already leaving the fair-ground as he arrived there. It was a relief to find that he would not be crowded out: looking at the sky he thought he would be away before the sun was far up.

The white mare stood very still while he fetched her harness. This morning, as always before, he dropped it over her back with practised quickness and ease, with a great jingle of buckles and bells. To his astonishment the white mare started forward as if struck and seemed to shudder under the weight. 'Whoa!' She shivered involuntarily

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

again. His astonishment and impatience increasing, he put on her bridle, but having buckled it, caressed her silky nostrils and spoke to her softly. She seemed to understand. Gently, little by little, he backed her into his little covered cart bearing his pots and pans, his food, and the red-and-white striped awnings and poles of his stall.

They joined the long line of brightly painted caravans and the engines drawing the roundabouts. The white mare was quiet. She moved steadily, as if the shouting and rattle of departure had awoken her against herself. Lanko walked at her side, relieved but silent, chewing a straw. Now and then, when the mare seemed to hesitate and slacken her pace again, he stroked her side, encouraging her. It was autumn, and the red of the trees, the heavy dew sparkling on the dying grass and the frosty smell in the air reminded him how often he and the mare had travelled this way, how she had never failed him, and how always, as on this morning, the jingle of the bells on her bridle had filled him with happiness.

Soon afterwards the sun broke out, shedding a soft, sudden light on that long line gleaming like a multi-coloured snake over the road. It seemed to bring out also not only colour but smell, so that besides the scent of frosty leaves and decay, Lanko suddenly caught all the odours that were, precious to him — the smell of horses and straw, of cooked herrings, of onions and cabbage, of oil, and the smoke belched out far ahead. It seemed difficult to believe he was not young again, so fresh and strong were these smells, as if coming to him for the first time.

Suddenly he was aroused out of these memories by the white mare. Her bells had ceased jingling. She had become perfectly still.

Lanko caressed her head with one hand and patted her side with the other. He consoled her, as he consoled himself, with the whisper that they had not far to go. She went on again, and with the habit of fifteen years he fell in with her slow, patient and uncomplaining step.

'Good girl — good girl,' he said.

The tinkle of her bells was once more a delight to him.

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

His deep, dark-brown eyes shone. In the sunshine the mare's coat gleamed like silk.

The journey did not seem long to him, but sometimes the mare seemed to lose all courage and would stop again, shivering, staring ahead and breathing hard, so that her sides rose and fell under his hand. Each time by consoling and caressing her he managed to make her go again. Gradually, however, her pauses grew more frequent, her breathing so difficult as to be almost agonizing, and her struggles to draw the cart more terrible.

Lanko dropped behind the rest of the line. Now, however, the thought that he would be crowded out at the pitching did not trouble him. He began to see now, even though with intense reluctance, that the mare was not stubborn or stupid or capricious, but ill. He began to reproach himself for having kicked her, even for having struck her. His efforts to atone for this were desperately tender.

'Good girl, good girl! Ain't far now, steady! Ain't far.'

They arrived at last. In the only remaining pitch, in one corner of the ground, he unharnessed the mare. As before she stood very still, uncomplaining, until he had finished. Then suddenly, as if only the burden of the harness and the existence of the cart behind her had borne her up since morning, she sank down upon the grass at his feet.

Lanko knelt down too, impelled by astonishment and fear. Her head was still upright, but the nostrils were faintly distended and from the mouth hung a little foam, like the slobbering of a child. The look in her eyes, sick and remote, began, even then, to grow deeper. It drove away very slowly but certainly all the intelligence, all the softness and understanding that had gathered there during all the years of her life. Lanko opened her mouth and touched her tongue. Her mouth seemed to him full of the deathly heat of a fever.

He stared at her for a long moment. She seemed to him to grow no worse. It was not yet afternoon and he began to console himself with the thought that she would be able to rest there all day and all night — even for nearly a week, if need be. 'Good girl, good girl,' he whispered to her.

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

An inspiration seized him. He fetched water in a bucket and held it to her lips in the profound hope that he had found her remedy. As in the morning, at the pool, however, she would not drink. In desperation he cajoled and pleaded with her: she seemed to him to turn away at last with all the weariness and distaste of a deadly sickness.

Afternoon drew on. The painted poles of the stalls and the tops of the great roundabouts, began to show themselves against the sky. Lanko unpacked his belongings, then let them remain where they had fallen on the grass. He could not think of trade, and after lighting a fire, boiled up a concoction which it seemed to him, if only he could persuade or force the mare to drink, must ease her before morning. All the time the mare crouched in the grass, the deathly sickness of her eyes growing steadily more terrible.

The faith in the remedy he had spent so long in preparing made Lanko approach her at last with both an entreaty and a smile on his lips. 'Good girl — drink — good girl.' He opened her mouth.

When he brought the medicine to her lips they closed suddenly again. He tried to be patient, to be calm. Again he stroked her soft nostrils and put his head against hers. In this way he told her not to be afraid, that he was only nursing her. But her lips would not remain open. Again and again they closed, feverish and clammy with foam, trembling as if both from fear and sickness. Sweat came out on Lanko's brow; he also trembled. 'Good girl, good girl!' he repeated.

Now she seemed to make no conscious effort to withstand him — it was as if the fever had seized and held her mouth closed, until she was rigid and terrified beneath it. She became exhausted quickly, with the result that while she had no power to withstand Lanko she had also none to repulse the tenacity of the sickness.

The medicine grew cold at Lanko's side. For a little while he felt helpless, full only of a dejected wonder that the strong, patient, silky body of the white mare should sink to this. Once again, and now more bitterly, he reproached

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

himself for the blows and the single kick he had given her that morning. 'That might have begun it,' he thought. Suddenly this enraged him, quickened him into life.

He left the mare, and running off, seized the first man he knew. It was the 'Fat Lady' man, the one with whom he had begun the argument so trivial and ridiculous that neither could remember on what subject it had been. Lanko seized him.

'Come and look at my old mare a minute!'

They went and knelt at the mare's side. She seemed to have sickened, even in those few moments, more rapidly and terribly than ever before. 'Look at her, look at her!'

The other spent a long time regarding her. Unable at last to bear this any longer, Lanko said:

'What is it? What do you think it is?'

Before them the mare grew visibly weaker, breathing with pathetic effort. The 'Fat Lady' man answered in low tones:

'You don't know — it might be anything.'

Lanko began to talk with intense desperation, explaining it all. 'I couldn't get her to drink this morning, not anyhow. Then on the road she kept lagging and stopping.' His voice fell a little. 'After that, just as we got here she fell down and hasn't been up since. She can't get up.'

The 'Fat Lady' man indicated the medicine and said slowly: 'We'll try her with that again — see if that'll do anything.'

Lanko heated the concoction again and brought it to the white mare's lips. He had become more than ever patient, fuller of sympathy and care. 'Open her mouth — gently,' he asked. The 'Fat Lady' man was tender also. Very slowly he forced open the lips which, having no longer the power to hold their own spittle, let it run down his wrists and arms in a pitiful flow. To his attentions there came no resistance, no struggle. Into the mouth held open thus, without strength or spirit, Lanko poured some of the medicine. Along the mare's neck ran a ripple or two; he poured in a little more, making more ripples in her silky flesh, and so on until she had drunk

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

it all. The 'Fat Lady' man let the lips close again. 'Good girl, good girl,' Lanko whispered.

Both men rose to their feet. 'You can't do no more than that,' the 'Fat Lady' man whispered. 'Let her be — keep her still. Put something over her.'

'What is it? What do you think it is?'

'You don't know — it might be anything.'

He went off, and over the mare Lanko laid sacks and a blanket or two. Again he told himself he must be patient and calm — so long as she kept up her head, even though with the sickness staring from her eyes, there was hope.

Dusk began falling; the grass was clothed in mists. In the fair itself lights sprang up from the vans; here and there was a paraffin flare.

The flanks of the mare gleamed softly in the dark, motionless, uncomplaining, expressive of her quiet and stoical spirit. To his joy her head did not droop again. At her side he sat and watched, looking at her as if to say: 'Tell me what I can do? Good girl, good girl.'

Out of the surrounding darkness began to come figures. One by one they bent and looked at the mare as she half-lay, half-sat in the grass, and then to Lanko expressed their opinions. He knew them all; he recognized the voices of the men who had jeered good-naturedly at him that morning by the drinking-pool. Their dark, check-shirted, red-shirted, swarthy figures blacked out the light of his fire. He saw the coconut man, the 'Aunt Sallies', the shooting men, the skittle-board and bagatelle owners, the watch and clock men, little Jews with rings on their fat fingers, the joy-wheel proprietor, the peacock man, his wife with long rings in her ears. The 'Fat Lady' herself came, too. Each of them looked at the white mare, some even touched her, all of them spoke to Lanko kindly, answering his persistent and desperate little inquiries with tact, with bluff, in whatever manner seemed to them best for keeping alive his hope in her ebbing life.

In each of them he found something for which to be thankful. He discovered too that his spirits did not droop, that he had now such faith in the mare as never before. It

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

even seemed to him that so far from drooping, her head had raised itself a little. In the darkness, also, the sickness seemed to have been driven from her eyes.

The men continued their advice, their calm bluff, the sympathies of their understanding yet undeceived minds. 'You can't tell — know better in the morning — might be over in a week or a day.' They spoke with the difficult care of men seeking to conceal a painful truth. Then one by one they wandered off slowly, as if reluctantly, into the darkness.

Lanko and the white mare were alone again. Her head had drooped, her flanks were steadier, she seemed at rest, he thought. He fell into reminiscences about her — of her early days, when she too had cantered, had borne her head with an arched, beautifully shadowed neck, when he had had to cut her tail in order to keep it from dragging on the ground. In those days he had decorated her not only with bells, but with coloured ribbons and cords and painted banners. She had travelled everywhere with him, in spring-time, in summer and autumn, and in winter had camped with him or had been stabled in some village while he traded. In his mind he could see her anywhere — on the road, in the meadows, at the fairs — with her white reflection in the drinking-pools where they went.

Suddenly he looked up. It was very dark, his fire became momentarily dim, but he saw that her head had fallen. Very slowly he crawled on his hands and knees towards her. He saw that what he had for so long dreaded and hoped against had taken place and was still going on. He could see, even as he came up to her, that her head was lowering in fast, spasmodic jerks, her mane falling across her black eyes, the sickly foam once again dripping from her lips. He leaned forward and took her head in his hands, striving to hold it erect in spite of its heaviness, smoothing back her mane as he might have done a child's hair. He wiped the foam from her lips with the sleeve of his coat. He spoke to her. He exerted his strength in order to keep her head from sinking a fraction. 'Good girl, good girl,' he whispered.

Suddenly she sank beyond his grasp. As if unable to realize

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

the swiftness of it all, he raised her head again and held it in his arms. She was still warm. She raised a murmur. This sound, either of protest or pain, seemed to strike him like something cold, in the centre of his breast. It crept to his heart. Her head sank to the ground. There was silence. He could not even call to her.

But into her soft silky flanks, still warm for him with the memory of a life recently there, and gleaming in the grass with the rest of her like some appealing ghost, he suddenly buried his face. His lips opened as if to say something, but nothing came, and they closed without a sound.

On the dark grass the white mare lay silent too.

A TINKER'S DONKEY

JONAS PRICKETT, a tinker, came into possession of a donkey. Jonas himself was a squat, dirty and rather indolent man, not much higher than a gooseberry bush, and with an old, warted face. He generally wore a bright blue neckerchief, a red cardigan waistcoat, and mouse-coloured trousers. His legs were so thick and bowed that he could not, as they say, have stopped a pig in an entry.

The donkey was undersized also, its legs feeble, its hair worn and mangy. Jonas had accepted it in exchange for money that was owing to him, being too lazy to press for the money, and very much relishing the thought of riding in the little black cart he had trundled for years.

But his wife, a very religious woman, with a drop of Irish blood in her veins, had stared at it on seeing it for the first time. Finally she had remarked with a forcible disgust he did not understand:

‘Merciful God, it’s a she-ass.’

And she called him all those names which cunning wives confer on simple husbands, asking him where he would keep it, what he would do with it, how he would make it pay. He bore all this with the peculiar patience of his kind, and at last they kept the donkey.

That summer was hot and dry. In Jonas’s little paddock the grass withered and died. The donkey, after eating every thistle, dock and dandelion, browsed on briar and hawthorn. Finally, one sultry night, she broke a gap in the hedge, entered a neighbouring field, and wandered and ate and rolled in a crop of vetch, cool, sweet, and blooming, till morning.

‘God Almighty,’ said Jonas, on waking and looking out, ‘she’s trespassing in the field of vetches!’

Hastily he scrambled into his trousers and hurried down. He forgot to lace his boots, and the dew ran into his stockings like water. Every time he came within reach of the ass she turned her head a little, brayed, and trotted away. It was eight o’clock before he caught her.

A TINKER'S DONKEY

He swore hotly. But it was too late. He had been observed, and though he tried to be cunning and said nothing, two days later he received a paper which looked very arresting in its bright blue.

'What's this?' he asked his wife. 'What shall I do?'

Her knowingness was maddening. 'Oh! it's nothing more than I expected,' she said. 'You've to go to the court on Friday morning. It's all to answer a charge about that mad donkey, and I shouldn't wonder if they put you in jail for it.'

'But I never ate the vetches!'

'Still I shouldn't wonder if they fined you five pound.'

He did not answer. He told himself over and over again how much he hated the idea of courts, policemen and legal formalities. In all his life he had never been in a police court, and he felt he never quite understood what would take place there. He shrank from thinking of it, and when he harnessed the donkey and drove off on Friday morning he felt weak in his legs and stomach.

It was a fine, sunny morning. Yellow buntings were singing, and there was yellow in the corn.

He drove at his usual leisurely pace, and for once was glad that the donkey would go no faster. Then, at Chelston, where a brook runs over the road, one of his wheels bumped over a stone as big as a beer-jar. There was a brief, sharp crack. Jonas looked over the side and saw the wheel askew.

He had to walk for the next two miles. He cursed a good deal. The wheel performed strange antics, as if part of a circus. At Shetsoe Jonas borrowed a hammer from Sam Houghton, whom he had once beaten at skittles for a quart.

'Knock the top o' the wheel,' said Sam.

Jonas obeyed. But between Shetsoe and Taploe the wheel grew worse, and at Taploe Jonas called on the woman who had given him the donkey and asked her advice.

She gave him a stone weighing half a hundredweight and said:

'Knock the bottom o' the wheel.'

He glared at her. This seemed like a joke of some kind. However, he picked up the stone and smote. The donkey moved quietly on.

A TINKER'S DONKEY

'There!' said the woman in triumph. 'She knows me.'

But the wheel lurched worse than ever. Jonas frequently knocked it with a stone or his boot, but he no longer asked the advice of anyone. Suddenly, a mile and a half away from the court, the wheel broke loose, rolled like a mad thing into the ditch, and brought the donkey to her knees.

In despair Jonas swore and scratched his hair. At last he unharnessed the donkey and extricated her. Contemplating the ruined cart, he felt like a man awaiting the next gesture of misfortune. At last he saw nothing for it but to leave the cart on the grass and take the donkey on.

For half a mile he progressed well. The red and blue roofs of the town appeared, and from the town the strokes of eleven boomed out over the fields.

Jonas caught his breath and, suddenly fearful of the penalties of arriving late at the court, jumped on the donkey's back and trotted her. She trotted beautifully, while he, with his red waistcoat and flapping blue handkerchief, bobbed precariously up and down, looking a little like some burlesque John Gilpin gone astray.

He rode through the streets to the court. Boys jeered at him. Near the court was a waste patch of land with a bush or two, on which he tethered the blowing and quaking ass.

Sweating profusely himself, he went into the court. Ushers began calling his name almost as soon as he arrived there, and not accustomed to the strict decorum, he began to shout when he entered the dock:

'My old cartwheel did a bust, and if it hadn't been for that blessed donkey——'

'Silence! Silence!' he was commanded. 'Attend to the charge.' The charge, which he did not understand, was read out to him. 'Do you plead guilty or not guilty?' he was asked.

'I always said she was a good donkey and now I know it!' he shouted.

'Silence! Answer the charge!'

'God's truth, how could I help it? I was abed and asleep when she went and did it.'

'Order! Order! You must answer the charge!'

A TINKER'S DONKEY

'What could I do? There she was in the field of vetches when I woke——'

'Guilty or not guilty?' the superintendent thundered.

'If she was in the vetches she was in the vetches and what could I do? Not guilty!'

The Court tittered: the superintendent read out the facts: witnesses were called; and, finally, the magistrates conferred.

All the time Jonas had to be prevented from saying such things as 'She was there when I woke! If she was there she was there, and what could I do?' Finally he did succeed in shouting loudly: 'She might have had the vetches, but when my old cart bust itself she brought me in, didn't she? I rode her in. Ain't that good enough?'

'Order! Order!' he was commanded again. 'You will be fined twenty shillings or ten days in default.'

'But God's truth,' he protested desperately, 'if it hadn't been for her I should never have been here at all! I couldn't have done it!'

And as he waddled up to pay his twenty shillings he could not understand why the Court was laughing at him, for as he stood there thinking of his donkey, his broken cart, and his wife, it seemed to him an altogether serious thing.

THE BARBER

JONAH'S saloon was not very big. It resembled more than anything a dirty blue bathroom fitted with a mirror large enough for ten fat men to preen themselves, and with seats looking for all the world like stolen church pews, none of them decently wide enough for the skinniest customer.

But we thought it very big — very big, very smoky, and very gloomy. In those days we were hardly tall enough to reach the stiff brass latch of the door, and we used to wriggle and squirm at the thought of a haircut there. Nevertheless we had to go.

For some reason there was always an army of men in Jonah's when we arrived: black-necked, poaching, shoe-making, prizefighting, often stinking men; men like brigands, men as bald as pigs, men with waistcoatfuls of silver medals, men with violet dragons and unicorns tattooed on their arms, even men like skeletons. Each man stood between us and the barber. There would be no haircut for us until the last man had gone.

We used to sit down, very still, like unaccustomed guests. Jonah presided, and of course we watched Jonah. He was an enormous man. In his hands a pair of grass shears would have looked like button scissors. His moustache was villainous, a symmetrical black sweep of pride, as sharp at the ends as a thorn on a sloe. When he held the razor above his head, it gleamed like a scimitar in the hands of an Arab, and its downward swoop was diabolical in its fierce accuracy.

'Zip-scrape! Zip-scrape!' went that razor. 'Zip-scrape!'

We were so awed we could hardly ask each other:

'How many men can you count this morning?'

'Seven.'

'Golly, seven!'

It seemed like an invincible horde. We would whisper dolefully.

Then suddenly, terrifyingly, Jonah would bawl like a sea lion:

THE BARBER

‘No whispering!’

He would glare sternly down on us. It was difficult to understand if it were all part of some joke. But he was grave as a picture, and I suppose we never saw his winks at the men.

‘What do you want?’ he would demand next in his awful bass.

‘Haircuts,’ we would whisper timidly.

‘Haircuts! Ha, ha! What next? Haircuts! Ha, ha!’ White flicks of lather would fly from his great fingers. ‘Ha, ha! Who told you to say that? Eh? What’s your name? John Willy?’

‘Tom.’

‘Wha-a-at? Speak up! Did you say John Willy?’

‘Tom.’

‘Burn my buttons, whoever heard of that? What’s your father?’

‘A butcher.’

‘A butcher, is he? Ha, ha!’ He would glower. ‘Tell him to send me a pound of sheep’s lights and liver!’

Lights and liver! We cackled like two young drakes.

‘No laughing!’ he ordered. ‘You wouldn’t do to eat sausage with the queen, you two!’

His tone was terrible so that we crouched a little lower into the benches that were like pews, except that they were littered with comic newspapers, not knowing what to make of the old fool. ‘Zip-scrape! chip-chip!’ he went on. One by one the poaching, tattooed, shoemaking, stinking men would shuffle out, Jonah richer by twopence and threepence a time, until only one remained. We would begin pushing the pink and green papers under our bare thighs in readiness.

Then, suddenly, a tremendous roar in the empty room: ‘Up you come for the guillotine!’

What should we do then, like young leverets, but jump up together!

‘One at once, balmy!’

What fools we were! Like a pair of Siamese twins we used to sit down together.

THE BARBER

'Now then!'

We scuffled. Evidently I was born to be a creature of misfortune, for a dozen times out of thirteen I used to knock down Jonah's umbrellas. God knows why, but Jonah used to repair umbrellas — and there they would lie like a heap of great dead bats — black umbrellas, green umbrellas, blue umbrellas, snuff umbrellas, cart umbrellas, silk umbrellas, ladies' umbrellas as genteel as parasols and with heads like birds. And Jonah might have been the mother of them all, his pretended fury was so like a storm.

'Look at what you've done, you sprats! Nice thing! Who's going to pay for it? I'll cut your tails off!'

And he would seize one of his precious umbrellas and, brandishing it high and wide, belabour our backsides without mercy. Our running and feinting never saved us — we were cornered and pinched and cuffed unmercifully by that great black barber. It was painful; even the laughter pained.

'What do you come here for?' he would keep demanding.

'Haircuts.'

'Haircuts! I don't cut hair — I only cut tails off, you plagues!'

That provoked another ripple of titters. Only his being out of breath saved us.

'How many winter beans make five?' he would question gravely, with recovering breath.

We knew that joke.

'Four!' we bawled.

'Wait till I get hold of your shirt-tail!'

The chase would begin. The whirr of the blue flames under the geyser would be smothered by inarticulate cries, a chatter of trembling cigar-boxes, and by that stentorian voice bellowing at us.

Then suddenly — quiet, a frown, and the grave command:

'Tidy the boxes. Quick! Quick!'

We were obedient. In a moment all was order, and we could once again hear the gas singing.

'Kneel in the chair!'

Only one would go. Swiftly a white sheet was tucked in

THE BARBER

at his collar and fell about him like a surplice. There would be a brief snip-snip of Jonah exercising his scissors, and then he stood in readiness.

Phouff! Whoever was in that chair would abruptly choke, struggle and cry. There was no end to Jonah, no end to the caprices of his imperial black will, and the sight of a boy's chin bearded with snowy lather apparently made life richer for him.

He would teach us to go there for haircuts!

All this, the umbrellas, the absurd catechisms, the comedy of the boxes and the lather smacked into one's face had happened before. We were never certain whether we liked it or not. We were already shaggy as ponies about the ears, and had received orders not to return like hooligans. Doubtless we could have visited some more discreet, black-coated model of a barber, but we always chose Jonah.

Presently the bell would jangle again and a man would enter, a commercial traveller or a florist, perhaps, so that the Jonah we knew would dissolve utterly, and a Jonah we felt was not a familiar, a Jonah as polite and neutral as a commissionaire, took his place, with the brush that had once wildly soaped our mouths now as prudent as the smelling-bottle of a lady.

'Zip-scape! Chip-chip!' went that razor again. 'Zip-scape!'

Gradually the pews began to fill again with more horsey, stinking, black-faced men, who smoked clays, chewed vile wads and swore about 'the silly sod who had let them down in the Cambridgeshire'. Jonah once again ignored us. The span of innumerable trims and shaves, shaves and trims would drearily lengthen. Patiently we would watch different faces coming and going. The sheep's-head clock on the wall would show that we had waited two hours. Hunger, sore backsides, aching knees, and eyes smarting from tobacco smoke would fill us with a wearisome, maddening desire to be gone.

At last, when there were perhaps ten men waiting to be shaved or trimmed, a look would pass between us, and as softly as we could we would rise and creep away.

THE BARBER

Then, artful and mischievous as mice, we would push each other against the door until that bell of his wrangled wildly, tauntingly, avengingly, happily, until Jonah ran out, a cart-umbrella in one hand and a razor in the other, and until we were sick with laughter at the sight and sound. If only he could have caught us! But he never advanced.

He vanished at last as if he had never seen us, and we returned home shaking those shaggy, ruffled, rat's-tailed heads he had never even touched with his scissors.